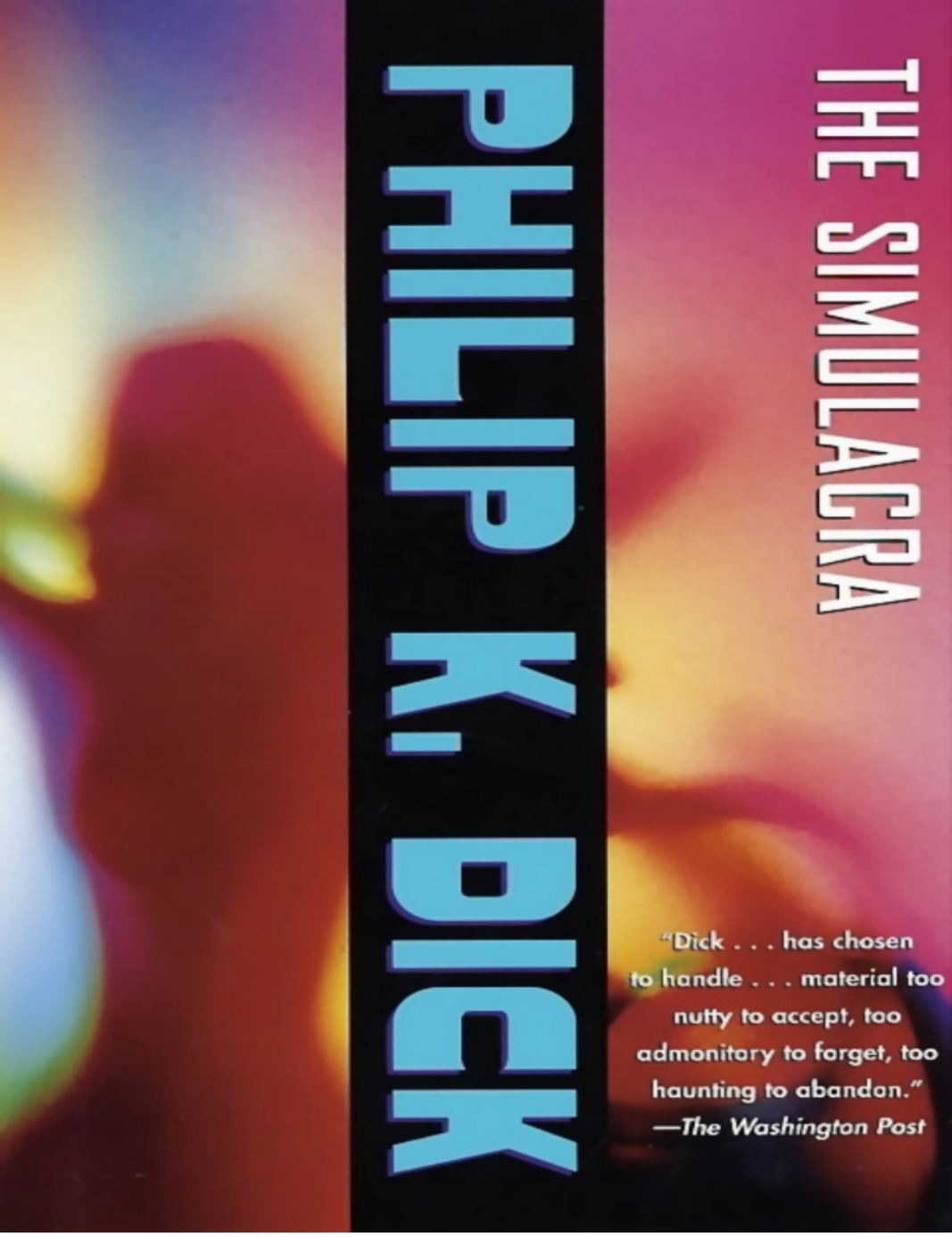
PHILIP K. DICK
THE SIMULACRA
"Dick . . . has chosen to handle . . . material too nutty to accept, too admonitory to forget, too haunting to abandon."
—The Washington Post

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Philip K. Dick
The Simulacra

1

The interoffice memo at Electronic Musical Enterprise frightened Nat Flieger and he did not know why. It dealt, after all, with a great opportunity, the famed Soviet pianist Richard Kongrosian, a psychokineticist who played Brahms and Schumann without manually approaching the keyboard, had been located at his summer home in Jenner, California. And, with luck, Kongrosian would be available for a series of recording sessions with EME. And yet -- Perhaps, Flieger reflected, it was the dark, wet forests of the extreme northern coastal region of California which repelled him; he liked the dry southlands near Tijuana, here where EME maintained its central offices. But Kongrosian, according to the memo, would not come out of his summer home; he had entered semi-retirement, possibly due to some unknown domestic situation, hinted to be a tragedy involving either his wife or his child. This had happened years ago, the memo implied.

It was nine in the morning. Nat Flieger reflexively poured water in a cup and fed the living protoplasm incorporated into the Ampek F-a2 recording system which he kept in his office; the Ganymedean life form did not experience pain and had not yet objected to being made over into a portion of an electronic system ... neurologically it was primitive, but as an auditory receptor it was unexcelled.

Water trickled through the membranes of the Ampek F-a2 and was gratefully absorbed; the conduits of the living system pulsed. I could take you along, Flieger decided. The F-a2 was portable and he preferred its curve to later, more sophisticated equipment. Flieger lit a *delicado,* walked to the window of his office to switch the blind to receive; warm Mexican sunlight burst in and he blinked. The F-a2 went into a state of extreme activity, then, utilizing the sunlight and the water, its metabolic processes stimulated. From habit Flieger watched it at work, but his mind was still on the memo.

Once more he picked up the memo, squeezed it, and it instantly whined, ‘ ... this opportunity presents EME with an acute challenge, Nat. Kongrosian refuses to perform in public but we have a contract through our Berlin affiliate, Art-Cor, and legally we can *make* Kongrosian record for us ... at least if we can get him to stand still long enough. Eh, Nat?'

‘Yes,' Nat Flieger said, nodding absently, replying to Leo Dondoldo's voice.

Why had the famed Soviet pianist acquired a summer home in northern California? That in itself was radical, frowned on by the central government in Warsaw. And if Kongrosian had learned to defy the ukases of the supreme Communist authority he could scarcely be

expected to flinch from a showdown with EME; Kongrosian, now in his sixties, was a professional at ignoring the legal ramifications of contemporary social life, either in Communist lands or in the USEA. Like many artists, Kongrosian travelled his own way, somewhere in between the two overpowering social realities.

A certain amount of hucksterism would have to be brought into such a pressing as this. The public had a short memory, as was well known; it would have to be forcibly reminded of Kongrosian's existence and musical cum Psionic talents. But EME's publicity department could readily handle it; after all, they had managed to sell many an unknown, and Kongrosian, for all his momentary obscurity, was scarcely that. But I wonder just how good Kongrosian is today, Nat Flieger reflected.

The memo was trying to sell him on that, too. ‘ ... everybody knows that Kongrosian has up until quite recently played before private gatherings,' the memo declared fervently. ‘For bigwigs in Poland and Cuba and before the Puerto Rican elite in New York. One year ago, in Birmingham, he appeared before fifty Negro millionaires for benefit purposes; the funds raised went to help with Afro Moslem lunar type colonization. I talked to a couple of modern composers who were present at that; they swore that Kongrosian hadn't lost any of his pizazz. Let's see ... that was in 2040. He was fifty-two, then. And of course he's always at the White House, playing for Nicole and that nonentity, der Alte.'

We had better get the F-a2 up there to Jenner and get him down on oxytape, Nat Flieger decided. Because this may be our last chance; artistic Psis like Kongrosian have a reputation for dying early.

He answered the memo. ‘I'll handle it, Mr Dondoldo. I'll fly up to Jenner and try to negotiate with him personally.'

That was his decision.

‘Whee,' the memo exulted. Nat Flieger felt sympathy for it.

The buzzing, super-alert, obnoxiously persistent reporting machine said, ‘Is it true, Dr Egon Superb, that you're going to try to enter your office today?'

There should have been some way to keep reporting machines out of one's house, Dr Superb reflected. However, there was not. He said, ‘Yes. As soon as I finish this breakfast which I am eating I will get into my wheel, drive to downtown San Francisco, park in a lot, walk directly to my office on Post Street, where as usual I will give psychotherapy to my first patient of the day. Despite the law, the so-called McPhearson Act.' He drank his coffee.

‘And you have the support -- ‘

‘The IAPP has fully endorsed my action,' Dr Superb said.

In fact he had talked to the executive council of the International

Association of Practising Psychoanalysts just ten minutes ago. ‘I don't know why you picked me out to interview. Every member of the IAPP will be in his office this morning.' And there were over ten thousand members, scattered throughout the USEA, both in North America and in Europe.

The reporting machine purred intimately, ‘Who do you feel is responsible for the passage of the McPhearson Act and der Alte's willingness to sign it into law?'

‘You know who,' Dr Superb said, ‘and so do I. Not the army and not Nicole and not even the NP. It's the great ethical pharmaceutical house, the cartel A.G. Chemie, in Berlin.' Everyone knew that; it was hardly news. The powerful German cartel had sold the world on the notion of drug-therapy for mental illness; there was a fortune to be made, there. And by corollary, psychoanalysts were quacks, on a par with orgone box and health food healers. It was not like the old days, the previous century, when psychoanalysts had had stature. Dr Superb sighed.

‘Does it cause you anguish,' the reporting machine said penetratingly, ‘to abandon your profession under external compulsion? Hmm?'

‘Tell your audience,' Dr Superb said slowly, ‘That we intend to keep on, law or no law. We can help, just as chemical therapy can help. In particular, characterological distortions -- where the entire life-history of the patient is involved.' He saw now that the reporting machine represented one of the major TV networks; an audience of perhaps fifty million sat in on this interchange. Dr Superb felt suddenly tongue-tied.

After breakfast when he walked outside to his wheel he found a second reporting machine lying in wait for him.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, this is the last of the race of the Vienna School of analysts. Perhaps the once distinguished psychoanalyst Dr Superb will say a few words to us.

‘Doctor?' It rolled towards him, blocking his way. ‘How do you feel, sir?'

Dr Superb said, ‘I feel lousy. Please get out of my way.'

‘Going to his office for the last time,' the machine declared, as he slipped away, ‘Dr Superb wears the air of a condemned man and yet a man secretly proud in the knowledge that according to his own lights he's done his job. But time and tide have passed all the Dr Superbs by ... and only the future will know if this is a good thing. Like the practice of bloodletting, psychoanalysis has thrived and then waned and now a new therapy has taken its place.'

Having boarded his wheel, Dr Superb started up the feeder-road and presently he was rolling along the autobahn towards San

Francisco, still feeling lousy, dreading what he knew to be inevitable: the clash with the authorities which lay directly ahead.

He was not a young man any more. There was too much spare flesh at his midsection; physically, he was too dumpy, almost middle-aged, to be a participant in these events. And he had a bald spot, which his bathroom mirror took pains to disclose to him each morning. Five years ago he had divorced his third wife, Livia, and had not remarried; his career was his life, his family. So what now? It was indisputable that, as the reporting machine had said, today he went to his office for the last time. Fifty million people in North America and Europe would watch, but would this get him a new vocation, a new transcendental goal to replace the old one? No, it would not.

To cheer himself up he picked up the wheel's phone receiver and dialled a prayer.

When he had parked and had walked to his Post Street office he found a small crowd of people and several more reporting machines and a handful of blue-uniformed San Francisco police waiting.

'Morning,' Dr Superb said to them awkwardly as he ascended the stairs of the building, key in hand. The crowd parted for him. He unlocked the door and pushed it open, letting morning sunlight spill into the long corridor with its prints by Paul Klee and Kandinsky which he and Dr Buckleman had put up seven years ago when together they had decorated this rather old building.

One of the reporting machines declared. 'The test will come, TV-viewers, when Dr Superb's first patient of the day arrives.'

The police, at parade rest, waited silently.

Pausing at the doorway before going on into his office, Dr Superb looked back at the people and then said, 'Nice day.

For October, anyhow.' He tried to think of something more to say, some heroic phrase which would convey the nobility of his sentiments and position. But nothing came to mind.

Perhaps, he decided, it was because there simply was no nobility involved; he was simply doing what he had done five days a week now for years on end and it did not involve any special courage to keep the routine alive one more time. Of course, he would pay for this donkey-like persistence by being arrested; intellectually he knew that, but his body, his lower nervous system, did not. Somatically, he continued along his path.

Someone in the crowd, a woman, called, 'We're with you, doctor. Good luck.' Several others grinned at him, and a flimsy cheer went up, briefly. The police looked bored. Dr Superb shut the door and went on.

In the front room, at her desk, his receptionist Amanda Conners raised her head and said, 'Good morning, doctor.'

Her bright red hair glowed, tied by a ribbon, and from her low-cut mohair sweater, her breasts protruded divinely.

'Morning,' Dr Superb said, pleased to see her here today, and so well-groomed at that. He handed her his coat, which she hung in the closet. 'Um, who's the first patient?' He lit a mild Florida cigar.

Consulting her book, Amanda said, 'It's Mr Rugge, doctor. At nine o'clock. That'll give you time for a cup of coffee. I'll fix it.' She quickly started towards the coffee machine in the corner.

'You know what's going to be happening here in a little while,' Superb said. 'Don't you?'

'Oh yes. But the IAPP will provide bail, won't it?' She brought him the small paper cup, carrying it with shaking fingers.

'I'm afraid this means the end of your job.'

'Yes.' Mandy nodded, no longer smiling; her large eyes had become dark. 'I can't understand why der Alte didn't veto that bill; Nicole was against it and so I was sure he would, right up to the last moment. My god, the government's got that time travel equipment; surely they can go ahead and see the harm this'll cause -- the impoverishment to our society.'

'Maybe they did look ahead.' And he thought, there will be no impoverishment.

The office door opened. There stood the first patient of the day, Mr Gordon Rugge, pale with nervousness.

'Ah, you came,' Dr Superb said. In fact, Rugge was early.

'The bastards,' Rugge said. He was a tall, lean man, in his mid-thirties, well dressed; professionally he was a broker on Montgomery Street.

Behind Rugge appeared two plainclothes members of the City Police. They fixed their gaze on Dr Superb, waiting.

The reporting machines extended their hose-like receptors, sucking in data rapidly. For an interval no one moved or spoke.

'Let's step into my inner office,' Dr Superb said to Mr Rugge. 'And pick up where we left off last Friday.'

'You're under arrest,' one of the two plainclothes police said at once. He advanced and handed Dr Superb a folded writ. 'Come along.' Taking hold of Superb's arm he started to lead him towards the door; the other plainclothes man moved to the other side so that they had Superb between them. It was all done neatly, with no fuss.

To Mr Rugge, Dr Superb said, 'I'm sorry, Gordon. Obviously there's nothing I can do by way of continuing your therapy.'

'The rats want me to take drugs,' Rugge said bitterly. 'And they know that pills make me sick; they're toxic to my particular system.'

'It is interesting,' one of the reporting machines was murmuring, for the benefit of its TV audience, 'to observe the loyalty of the

analyst's patient. And yet, why not? This man has placed his faith in psychoanalysis possibly for years.'

'For six years,' Rugge said to it. 'And I'd go six more, if necessary.'

Amanda Conners began to cry silently into her handkerchief.

As Dr Superb, escorted by both the plainclothes men and the uniformed San Francisco police, was led to the waiting patrol car, the crowd once again gave a meagre cheer of encouragement. But for the most part, Superb observed, they were older people. Remnants from earlier times when psychoanalysis was respected; like himself, part of another era entirely. He wished there were a few youths to be seen, but there were not.

At the police station the thin-faced man in the heavy overcoat, smoking the Bela King handmade Philippine cigar, glanced out the window with flat, cold eyes, consulted his watch, then paced restlessly.

He was just putting out his cigar and preparing to light another when he caught sight of the police car. At once he hurried outside on to the loading platform where the police were preparing to begin processing of the individual in question. 'Doctor,' he said. 'I'm Wilder Pembroke. I'd like to talk to you a moment.' He nodded to the police and they fell back, leaving Dr Superb unhanded. 'Come inside; I've got temporary use of a room on the second floor. This won't take long.'

'You're not one of the City Police,' Dr Superb said eyeing him acutely. 'Or perhaps you're NP.' He looked uneasy, now. 'Yes, that must be it.'

Pembroke, as he led the way to the elevator, said, 'Just consider me an interested party.' He lowered his voice as a group of police officials passed them. 'Interested in seeing you back in your office, treating your patients.'

'You have authority to do that?' Superb asked.

'I think so.' The elevator came and the two of them entered it. 'It'll take an hour or so to get you back there, however. Please try to be patient.' Pembroke lit a fresh cigar.

He did not offer one to Superb.

'May I ask -- what agency you are with?'

'I told you.' Pembroke felt irritable. 'You're simply to consider me an interested party; don't you understand?' He glared at Superb, and neither of them spoke again until they had reached the second floor. 'Sorry to be abrupt,' Pembroke said as they walked down the hall. 'But I'm very concerned about your arrest. Very disturbed.' He held the door open, and Superb cautiously entered room 209. 'Of course, I get disturbed rather readily. It's my job, more or less. Just as it's your job not to permit yourself to become emotionally involved.' He smiled, but Dr Superb did not smile back. Too tense for that, Pembroke observed.

Superb's reaction fitted the profile contained in the dossier.

They seated themselves warily, facing each other.

Pembroke said, 'There's a man coming to consult you. Not far from now, going to be a patient of yours. You understand? So we want you to be there; we want your office open so you can accept him and treat him.'

Nodding, his face rigid, Dr Superb said, 'I -- see.'

'The rest -- the others you treat -- we don't care about. Whether they get sicker, get well, pay you a fortune, welsh on their bills -- anything. Just this one individual.'

'And after he's treated,' Superb said, 'then you'll shut me down? Like all the other psychoanalysts?'

'We'll talk about that then. Not right now.'

'Who is this man?'

Pembroke said, 'I'm not going to tell you.'

'I assume,' Dr Superb said after a pause, 'you've used von Lessinger's time travel apparatus to scout out my results with this man.'

'Yes, 'Pembroke said.

'So you have no doubts I will be able to cure him.'

'On the contrary,' Pembroke said. 'You won't be able to help him; that's exactly why we want you there. If he obtains chemical therapy he'll recover his mental balance. And it's extremely important to us that he remains ill. So you can see, doctor, we need the continued professional existence of a quack, a practising psychoanalyst.'

Carefully Pembroke relit his cigar, which had gone out.

'So your primary instructions are: turn down no new patients. You understand? However insane -- or rather, however evidently sane.' He smiled; the doctor's discomfort amused him.

2

Lights burned late in the great communal apartment building The Abraham Lincoln, as this was All Souls night: the residents, all six hundred of them, were required by their charter to attend, down in the subsurface community hall.

They filed in, men, women and children; at the door Vince Strikerock, businesslike and cool, a good, solid bureaucratic official, operated their new identification reader, checking each of them in turn to be sure that no one from outside, from another communal apartment building, got in. The residents submitted good-naturedly and it all went very fast.

'Hey Vince, how much'd it set us back?' asked old Joe Purd, oldest resident in the building; he had moved in with his wife the day the building, in May of 1992, had been built.

His wife was dead now and the children had grown up, married and moved on, but Joe remained.

'Plenty,' Vince said quietly, 'But it's error-proof. It isn't merely subjective.' Up to now, in his permanent job as sergeant of arms, he had admitted people merely by his ability to recognize them. But that way, he had let in a pair of goons from Robin Hill Manor and they had disrupted the entire meeting with their questions and comments. It would not happen again: Vince Strikerock had vowed that, to himself and to his fellow apartment dwellers. And he meant it. Passing out copies of the agenda, Mrs Wells smiled fixedly and chanted, 'Item 3 A, Appropriation for Roof Repairs, has been moved to 4 A. Please make a note of that.'

The residents accepted their agendas and then divided into two streams flowing to opposite sides of the hall; the liberal faction of the building seated themselves on the right and the conservatives on the left, each conspicuously ignoring the existence of the other. A few uncommitted persons -- new residents or oddballs -- took seats in the rear, self-conscious and silent as the room buzzed with many small conferences.

The tone, the mood of the room, was tolerant, but the residents knew that tonight there was going to be a clash. Presumably, both sides were prepared. Here and there documents, petitions, newspaper clippings rustled as they were read and exchanged, handed back and forth.

On the platform, seated at the table with the four building trustees, chairman Donald Tishman felt sick at his stomach.

A peaceful man, he shrank from these violent squabbles.

Even seated in the audience he found it too much for him, and

here tonight he would have to take active part; time and tide had rotated the chair around to him, as it did to each resident in turn, and of course it would be the night the school issue reached its climax.

The room had almost filled and now Patrick Doyle, the current building skypilot, looking none too happy in his long white robe, raised his hands for silence. ‘The opening prayer,' he called huskily, cleared his throat and brought forth a small card. ‘Everyone please shut your eyes and bow your head.' He glanced at Tishman and the trustees, and Tishman nodded for him to continue. ‘Heavenly father,' Doyle read, ‘we the residents of the communal apartment building Abraham Lincoln beseech you to bless our assembly tonight. Um, we ask that in your mercy you enable us to raise the funds for the roof repairs which seem imperative. We ask that our sick be healed and that in processing applicants wishing to live amongst us we show wisdom in whom we admit and who we turn away. We further ask that no outsiders get in and disrupt our law-abiding, orderly lives and we ask in particular that lastly, if it be thy will, that Nicole Thibodeaux be free of her sinus headaches which have caused her not to appear before us on TV lately, and that those headaches not have anything to do with that time two years ago, which we recall, when that stagehand allowed that weight to fall and strike her on the head, sending her to the hospital for several days. Anyhow, amen.'

The audience agreed, ‘Amen.'

Rising from his chair, Tishman said, ‘Now, before the business of the meeting, we'll have a few rewarding minutes of our own talent display for our enjoyment. First, the three Fetersmoeller girls from apartment number 205. They will do a soft-shoe dance to the tune of "I'll Build a Stairway to the Stars." ‘ He reseated himself, and on to the stage came the three little blonde-haired children, familiar to the audience from talent shows in the past.

As the Fetersmoeller girls, in their striped pants and glittery silver jackets, shuffled smilingly through the dance, the door to the outside corridor opened and a latecomer, Edgar Stone, appeared.

He was late, this evening, because he had been grading test papers of his next-door neighbour, Mr Ian Duncan, and as he stood in the doorway his mind was still on the test and the poor showing which Duncan -- whom he barely knew had made. It seemed to him that without even having finished the grading of the test he could see that Duncan had failed.

On the stage the Fetersmoeller girls sang in their scratchy voices, and Stone wondered why he had come. Perhaps for no more reason than to avert a fine, it being mandatory for the residents to be here tonight. These amateur talent shows, put on so frequently, meant nothing to him; he recalled the old days when the TV set had carried

entertainment, good shows put on by professionals. Now of course all the professionals who were any good were under contract to the White House, and the TV had become educational, not entertaining. Mr Stone thought of the glorious old golden age, long since gone, of great old movie comics such as Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine, and then he looked once more at the Fettersmoeller sisters and groaned.

Vince Strikerock, ever on duty, hearing him, glanced at him severely.

At least he had missed the prayer. He presented his identification to Vince's expensive new machine and it allowed him to pass -- lucky break! -- down the aisle towards a vacant seat. Was Nicole watching this, tonight? Was a talent scout present somewhere in the audience? He saw no unfamiliar faces. The Fetersmoeller girls were wasting their time. Seating himself, he closed his eyes and listened, unable to endure watching. They'll never make it, he thought.

They'll have to face it, and so will their ambitious parents, they're untalented, like the rest of us ... The Abraham Lincoln has added little to the cultural store of the USEA, despite its sweaty, strenuous determination, and you are not going to be able to alter that.

The hopelessness of the Fetersmoeller girls' position made him remember once more the test papers which Ian Duncan, trembling and waxen-faced, had pressed into his hands early that morning. If Duncan failed he would be even worse off than the Fetersmoeller girls because he would not even be living at The Abraham Lincoln; he would drop out of sight -- their sight, anyhow -- and would revert to a despised and ancient status: he would, in all probability, unless gifted with some special skills, find himself once more in a dorm, working on a manual gang as they all had done back in their teens.

Of course he would also be refunded the money which he had paid for his apartment, a large sum which represented the man's sole major investment in life. From one standpoint, Stone envied him. What would I do, he asked himself as he sat, eyes closed, if I had my equity back right now, in a lump sum? Perhaps, he thought, I'd emigrate. Buy one of those cheap, illegal jalopies they peddle at those lots which -- Clapping hands roused him. The girls had finished, and he, too, joined in the applause. On the platform, Tishman waved for silence. ‘Okay, folks, I know you enjoyed that, but there's lots *more* in store, tonight. And then there's the business part of the meeting; we mustn't forget that.' He grinned at them.

Yes, Stone thought. The ‘beezness'. And he felt tense, because he was one of the radicals at The Abraham Lincoln who wanted to abolish the building's grammar school and send their children to a public grammar school where they would be exposed to children from

other buildings entirely.

It was the kind of idea which met much opposition. And yet, in the last weeks, it had gained support. Perhaps they were entering an odd and unusual time. In any case, what a broadening experience it would be; their children would discover that people in other apartment buildings were no different from themselves. Barriers between people of all apartments would be torn down and a new understanding would come about.

At least, that was how it struck Stone, but the conservatives did not see it that way. Too soon, they said, for such mixing. There would be outbreaks of fights as the children clashed over which building was supreme. In time it would happen ... but not now, not so soon.

Risking the severe fine, small, grey, nervous Mr Ian Duncan missed the assembly and remained in his apartment that evening, studying official Government texts on the political history of the United States of Europe and America. He was weak in that, he knew; he could barely comprehend the economic factors, let alone all the relpol ideologies that had come and gone during the twentieth century, directly contributing to the present situation. For instance, the rise of the Democratic-Republican Party. Once it had been two parties (or was it three?) which had engaged in wasteful quarrels, in struggles for power, just the way buildings fought now. The two -- or three -- parties had merged, about 1985, just before Germany entered the USEA. Now there was just the one party, which had ruled a stable and peaceful society, and everyone, by law, belonged to it. Everyone paid dues and attended meetings and voted, each four years, for a new der Alte -- for the man they thought Nicole would like best.

It was nice to know that they, the people, had the power to decide who would become Nicole's husband, each four years; in a sense it gave to the electorate supreme power, even above Nicole herself. For instance, this latest man, Rudolf Kalbfleisch. Relations between this der Alte and the First Lady were quite cool, indicating that she did not like this most recent choice very much. But of course being a lady she would never let on.

When did the position of First Lady begin to assume stature greater than that of President? The text inquired. In other words, when did our society become matriarchal, Ian Duncan said to himself. Around about 1990; I know the answer to that. There were glimmerings before that -- the change came gradually. Each year der Alte became more obscure, the First Lady became better known, more liked, by the public which brought it about. Was it a need for mother, wife, mistress, or perhaps all three? Anyhow they got what they wanted; they got Nicole and she is certainly all three and more besides.

In the corner of his living room the television set said *taaaaanggg,* indicating that it was about to come on. With a sigh, Duncan closed the official relpol textbook and turned his attention to the screen. A special, dealing with activities at the White House, he speculated. Another tour, perhaps, or a thorough scrutiny (in massively-detailed depth) about a new hobby or passion of Nicole's. Has she taken up collecting bone-china cups? If so, we will have to view each and every damn cup.

Sure enough, the round, heavy, wattled features of Maxwell W. Jamison, the White House News Secretary, appeared on the screen. 'Evening, people of this land of ours,' he said solemnly. 'Have you ever wondered what it would be like to descend to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean? Nicole has, and to answer that question she has assembled here in the Tulip Room of the White House three of the world's foremost oceanographers. Tonight she will ask them for their stories, and you will hear them too, as they were taped live, just a short while ago through the facilities of the Unified Triadic Network's Public Affairs Bureau.'

And now to the White House, Duncan said to himself. At least vicariously. We who can't find our way there, who have not talents which might interest the First Lady even for one evening: we get to see in anyhow, through the carefully-regulated window of our television set.

Tonight he did not really want to watch, but it seemed expedient to do so; there might be a surprise quiz on the programme, at the end. And a good grade on a surprise quiz might well offset the bad grade he had surely made on the recent relpol test, now being corrected by his neighbour, Mr Edgar Stone.

On the screen bloomed now the lovely tranquil features, the pale skin and dark, intelligent eyes, the wise and yet pert face of the woman who had come to monopolize their attention, on whom an entire nation, almost an entire planet, dwelt obsessively. At the sight of her, Ian Duncan felt sick with fear. He had failed her; his rotten test results were somehow known to her and although she would say nothing, the disappointment was there.

'Good evening,' Nicole said in her soft, slightly husky voice.

'It's this way,' Duncan found himself mumbling. 'I don't have a head for abstractions; I mean, all this religio-political philosophy -- it makes no sense to me. Couldn't I just concentrate on concrete reality? I ought to be baking bricks or turning out shoes.' I ought to be on Mars, he thought, on the *frontier.*

I'm flunking out here; at thirty-five I'm washed up, *and she knows it.*

Let me go Nicole, he thought in desperation. Don't give me any

more tests, because I don't have a chance of passing them. Even this programme about the ocean's bottom; by the time it's over I'll have forgotten all the data. I'm no use to the Democratic-Republican Party.

He thought about his former buddy Al, then. Al could help me. Al worked for Loony Luke, at one of his Jalopy Jungles peddling the little tin and cardboard ships that even defeated People could afford, ships that could, if luck was with them, successfully make a one-way trip to Mars. Al, he said to himself, could get me a jalopy wholesale.

On the TV screen, Nicole was saying, ‘And really, it is a world of much enchantment, with luminous entities far surpassing in variety and in sheer delightful wonder anything found on other planets. Scientists compute that there are more forms of life in the ocean -- ‘

Her face faded, and a sequence showing unnatural, grotesque fish took its place. This is part of the deliberate propaganda line, Duncan realized. An effort to take our minds off Mars and the idea of getting away from the Party -- and from her. On the screen a bulbous-eyed fish gaped at him, and his attention, despite himself, was captured. Jeez, he thought, it is a weird world down there. Nicole, he thought, you've got me trapped. If only Al and I had succeeded; we might be performing right now for you, and we'd be happy. While you interviewed world-famous oceanographers Al and I would be discreetly playing in the background, perhaps one of the Bach ‘Two Part Inventions'.

Going to the closet of his apartment, Ian Duncan bent down and carefully lifted a cloth-wrapped object into the light. We had so much youthful faith in this, he recalled.

Tenderly, he unwrapped the jug; then, taking a deep breath, he blew a couple of hollow notes on it. Duncan & Miller and Their Two-man Jug Band, he and Al Miller had been, playing their own arrangement for two jugs of Bach and Mozart and Stravinsky. But the White House talent scout -- the skunk. He had never even given them a fair audition. It had been done, he told them. Jesse Pigg, the fabulous jug-artist from Alabama, had got to the White House first, entertaining and delighting the dozen and one members of the Thibodeaux family gathered there with his version of ‘Derby Ram' and ‘John Henry' and the like.

‘But,' Ian Duncan had protested, ‘this is *classical* jug. We play late Beethoven sonatas.'

‘We'll call you,' the talent scout had said briskly. ‘If Nicky shows an interest at any time in the future.'

Nicky! He had blanched. Imagine being that intimate to the First Family. He and Al, mumbling pointlessly, had retired from the stage and their jugs, making way for the next act, a group of dogs dressed up in Elizabethan costumes portraying characters from *Hamlet*.

The dogs had not made it, either, but that was little consolation.

'I am told,' Nicole was saying, 'that there is so little light in the ocean depths that, well, observe this strange fellow.' A fish, sporting a glowing lantern before him, swam across the TV screen.

Startling him, there came a knock on the apartment door.

With caution, LAN Duncan answered it. He found his neighbour Mr Stone standing there, looking nervous.

'You weren't at All Souls?' Edgar Stone said. 'Won't they check and find out?' He held in his hands Ian Duncan's corrected test.

Duncan said, 'Tell me how I did.' He prepared himself.

Entering the apartment, Stone shut the door after him. He glanced at the TV set, saw Nicole seated with the oceanographers, listened for a moment to her, then abruptly said in a hoarse voice, 'You did fine.' He held out the test.

'I *passed?'*

Duncan could not believe it. He accepted the papers, examining them with incredulity. And then he understood what had happened.

Stone had conspired to see that he passed. He had falsified the score, probably out of humanitarian motives. Duncan raised his head and they looked at each other, neither speaking. This is terrible, Duncan thought. What'll I do now? His reaction amazed him, but there it was.

I wanted to fail, he realized. Why? So I can get out of here, so I would have an excuse to give up all this, my apartment and my job, say fork it and go. Emigrate with nothing more than the shirt on my back, in a jalopy that falls to pieces the moment it comes to rest in the Martian wilderness.

'Thanks,' he said glumly.

In a rapid voice, Stone said, 'Y-you can do the same for me sometime.'

'Oh yeah, be happy to,' Duncan said.

Scuttling back out of the apartment, Stone left him alone with the TV set, his jug and the falsely corrected test papers, and his thoughts.

3

One would have to go back to the year 1994, the year that West Germany entered the Union as the fifty-third of the United States, to understand why Vince Strikerock, an American citizen and an inhabitant of The Abraham Lincoln Apartments, was listening to der Alte on the television set while he shaved, the next morning. There was something about this particular der Alte, President Rudi Kalbfleisch, which always irritated him, and it would be a great thing when Kalbfleisch, in two more years, reached the end of his term and had, by law, to retire. It was always a great thing, a good day, when the law got one of them out of office; Vince always found it worth celebrating.

None the less, Vince felt, it was best to do all that was possible with the old man while he remained in office, and so he put down his razor and went into the living room to fiddle with the knobs of the TV set. He adjusted the n, the r and b knobs, and hopefully anticipated a turn for the better in the dire droning on of the speech ... however, no change took place. Too many other viewers had their own ideas as to what the old man ought to be saying, Vince realized. In fact there were probably enough other people in this one apartment building alone to offset any pressures he might try to exert on the old man through his particular set. But anyhow that was democracy. Vince sighed. This was what they had wanted: a government receptive to what the people said. He returned to the bathroom and continued shaving.

'Hey Julie!' he called to his wife. 'Is breakfast about ready?' He heard no sound of her stirring about in the kitchen of the apartment. And come to think of it, he hadn't noticed her beside him in bed as he had groggily got up this morning.

All at once he remembered. Last night after All Souls he and Julie, after a particularly bitter fight, had got divorced, had gone down to the building's M & D Commissioner and filled out the D papers. Julie had packed her things then and there; he was alone in the apartment -- no one was fixing his breakfast and unless he got busy he would miss it entirely.

It was a shock, because this particular marriage had endured for *six entire months* and he had become thoroughly used to seeing her in the mornings. She knew just how he liked his eggs (cooked with a small amount of Mild Munster cheese). Damn the new permissive divorce legislation that old President Kalbfleisch had ushered in! Damn Kalbfleisch in general; why didn't the old man turn over and die some afternoon during his famous two o'clock nap? But then of course

another der Alte would simply take his place. And even the old man's death wouldn't bring Julie back; that lay outside the area of USEA bureaucracy, vast as it was.

Savagely, he went to the TV set and pressed the s knob; if enough citizens pushed it, the old man would stop entirely the stop knob meant total cessation of the mumbling speech.

Vince waited, but the speech went on.

And then it struck him as odd that there should be a speech so early in the morning; after all, it was only eight a.m. Perhaps the entire lunar colony had gone up in a single titanic explosion of its fuel depot. The old man would be telling them that more belt-tightening was required, in order to restock the space programme; these and other quaint calamities had to be expected. Or perhaps at last some authentic remains of a sentient race had been unearthed -- or was the term unmarsed? -- on the fourth planet, hopefully not in the French area but in, as der Alte liked to phrase it, ‘one's own'. You Prussian bastards, Vince thought. We never should have admitted you into what I like to phrase as ‘our tent', our federal union, which should have been confined to the Western Hemisphere. But the world has shrunk. When you are founding a colony millions of miles away on another moon or planet, the three thousand miles separating New York from Berlin did not seem meaningful. And god knew the Germans in Berlin were willing.

Picking up the telephone, Vince called the manager of the apartment building. ‘My wife Julie -- I mean my ex-wife did she take another apartment last night?' If he could locate her he could perhaps have breakfast with her and that would be cheering. He listened hopefully.

‘No, Mr Strikerock.' A pause. ‘Not according to our records.'

Aw hell, Vince thought, and hung up.

What was marriage, anyhow? An arrangement of sharing things, such as right now being able to discuss the meaning of der Alte giving an eight a.m. speech and getting someone else -- his wife -- to fix breakfast while he prepared to go to his job at Karp u. Sohnen Werke's Detroit branch. Yes, it meant an arrangement in which one could get another person to do certain things one didn't like to do, such as cooking meals; he hated having to eat food which he had prepared himself. Single, he would eat at the building's cafeteria; he foresaw that, based on past experience. Mary, Jean, Laura, now Julie; four marriages and the last the shortest.

He was going downhill. Maybe, god forbid, he was a latent queer.

On the TV, der Alte uttered, ‘ ... and paramilitary activity recalls the Days of Barbarism and hence is doubly to be renounced.'

Days of Barbarism -- that was the sweet-talk for the Nazi Period of

the middle part of the previous century, now gone nearly a century but still vividly, if distortedly, recalled. So der Alte had taken to the airwaves to denounce the Sons of Job, the latest nut organization of a quasi-religious nature flapping about in the streets, proclaiming a purification of national ethnic life, etc., or whatever it was they proclaimed.

In other words, stiff legislation to bar persons from public life who were odd -- those born specially, due to the years of radiation fall-out from bomb testing, in particular from the vicious People's China blasts.

That would mean Julie, Vince conjectured, since she's sterile. Because she could not bear children she would not be permitted to vote ... a rather neurotic connective, logically possible only in the minds of a Central European people such as the Germans. The tail that wags the dog, he said to himself as he dried his face. We in *Nord Amerika* are the dog; the Reich is the tail. What a life. Maybe I ought to emigrate to colonial reality, live under a faint, fitful, pale-yellow sun where even things with eight legs and a stinger get to vote ... no Sons of Job, there. Not that all the special people were that special, but a good many of them had seen fit -- and for good reason -- to emigrate. As had quite a number of quite unspecial folk who were simply tired of the overpopulated, bureaucratically-controlled life on Terra these days, whether in the USEA, in the French Empire, or in People's Asia, or Free -- that is, black -- Africa.

In the kitchen he fixed himself bacon and eggs. And, while the bacon cooked, he fed the sole pet allowed him in the apartment building: George III, his small green turtle.

George III ate dried flies (twenty-five per cent protein, more nourishing than human food), hamburger, and ant eggs, a breakfast which caused Vince Strikerock to ponder on the axiom *de gustibus non disputandum est* there's no accounting for other people's tastes, especially at eight in the morning.

Even as recently as five years ago he could have possessed a pet bird in The Abraham Lincoln, but that was now ruled out. Too noisy, really. Building Rule s205; thou shalt not whistle, sing, tweet or chirp. A turtle was mute -- as was a giraffe, but giraffes were verboten, too, along with the quondam friends of man, the dog and cat, the companions which had vanished back in the days of der Alte Frederich Hempel, whom Vince barely remembered. So it could not have been the quality of muteness, and he was left, as so often before, merely to guess at the reasoning of the Party bureaucracy. He could not genuinely fathom its motives, and in a sense for that he was glad. It proved that he was not spiritually a part of it.

On the TV the withered, elongated, near-senile face had vanished

and a moment of music, a purely audible event, had replaced it. Percy Grainger, a tune called 'Handel in the Strand', as banal as could be ... just the appropriate postscript to what had come before, Vince reflected. He clicked his heels abruptly, came to attention, in a parody of Germanic military stiffness, chin up, arms rigid, as the melody tinkled from the speaker of the TV set; Vince Strikerock at attention to this child's music which the authorities, the so-called *Ges,* saw fit to play. Heil, Vince said to himself, and raised his arm in the ancient Nazi salute.

The music tinkled on.

Vince turned to another channel.

And there, on the screen, a hounded-looking man fleetingly appeared in the midst of a crowd which seemed to be cheering him; the man, with what were obviously police on both sides of him, disappeared into a parked vehicle. At the same time the newscaster declared, ' ... and, just as in hundreds of other cities across the USEA, Dr Jack Dowling, leading psychiatrist of the Vienna School here in Bonn, is taken into custody as he protests the newly-signed-into-law bill, the McPhearson Act ... '

On the screen the vehicle, a marked police car, zipped away.

A hell of a note, Vince thought glumly. Sign of the times; more repressive, scared legislation by the establishment. So who am I going to get help from if Julie's departure causes me to break down mentally? As well it might. I've never consulted an analyst -- I've never needed to in my entire life.

But this ... nothing like this, precisely this bad, has ever happened to me. Julie, he thought, where are you? Now, on the TV screen, the scene changed, and yet it remained the same. Vince Strikerock saw a new crowd, different police, another psychoanalyst being led off; another protesting soul taken into custody.

'It is interesting,' the TV set murmured, 'to observe the loyalty of the analyst's patient. And yet, why not? This man has placed his faith in psychoanalysis possibly for years.'

And where did it get him? Vince wondered.

Julie, he said to himself, if you're with someone, some other man right now, there's going to be trouble. Either I'll drop dead -- either it will kill me outright -- or I'm going to give it to you and that individual, whoever he is. Even if, *especially* if, he's a friend of mine.

I'm going to get you back, he decided. My relationship with you is unique, not like that with Mary, Jean and Laura.

I love you; that's it. My god, he thought, I'm in love! And in this day and age. Incredible. If I told her, if she knew, she'd laugh her head off. That's Julie.

I should go to an analyst, he realized, for being in a state like this,

for being totally psychologically dependent on a cold, selfish creature like Julie for existence itself. Hell, its unnatural. And -- it's folly.

Could Dr Jack Dowling, leading psychiatrist of the Vienna School in Bonn, Germany, cure me? Free me? Or this other man they're showing, this -- he listened to the newscaster, who droned on as the police vehicle drove away -- Egon Superb. He had looked like an intelligent, sympathetic person, gifted with the balm of empathetic understanding. Listen, Egon Superb, Vince thought, I'm in deep trouble; my tiny world collapsed this morning when I woke up. I need a woman whom I'll probably never see again.

A.G. Chemie's drugs can't help me with this ... except, perhaps, a mortal overdose. And that's not the sort of help I'm after.

Maybe I should roust out my brother Chic and both of us join the Sons of Job, he thought abruptly. Chic and I swear fealty to Bertold Goltz. Others have done so, other malcontents, others who have dismally failed, either in their private lives -- as I have -- or in business or in their social ascent from *Be* to *Ge.*

Chic and I Sons of Job, Vince Strikerock thought eerily.

In bizarre uniform, parading down the street. Being jeered at. And yet believing -- in what? In ultimate victory? In Goltz, who looks like a movie version of a *Rattenfanger,* a rat-catcher? He cringed from the notion; it frightened him.

And still the idea remained lodged in his mind.

In his apartment on the top of The Abraham Lincoln Apartments, thin, balding Chic Strikerock, Vince's older brother, awoke and peered nearsightedly at the clock to see if one could manage to remain in bed a bit longer. But the excuse was not valid; the clock read eight-fifteen. Time to get up ... a news machine, noisily vending its wares outside the building, had awakened him, fortunately. And then Chic discovered to his shock that someone was in bed with him; he opened his eyes fully and made himself rigid as he inspected the covered outline of what he saw at once, from the tumble of brown hair, was a young woman, and one familiar (that was a relief -- or was it?) to him. Julie! His sister-in-law, his brother Vince's wife. Good grief. Chic sat up.

Let's see, he said to himself rapidly. Last night -- what did go on here after All Souls, anyhow? Julie appeared, didn't she, distraught, with one suitcase and two coats and telling a disjointed story which boiled down to a simple fact, at last; she had broken up with Vince legally; she no longer had any official relationship to him and was free to come and go as she pleased. So here she was. Why? That part he couldn't remember; he had always liked Julie but -- it did not explain this; what she had done concerned her own secret, inner world of values and attitudes, not his, not anything that was objective, *real.*

Anyhow, here Julie was, still sound asleep, too, here physically but withdrawn into herself, curled up, retracted mollusc-like, which was just as well, because for him it all seemed incestuous, despite the clarity of the law in this variety of matter. She, to him, was more like family. He had never looked in her direction. But last night, after a few drinks -- that was it; he could not drink any more. Or rather he could, and when he did he underwent a rapid change for what at the time seemed like the better; he became outgoing, adventurous, extroverted, instead of morose and taciturn.

But here was a consequence. Look what he got involved in, here.

And yet on a very deep, private level he didn't object as much as all that. It was a compliment to him, her showing up here.

But it would be awkward, the next time he ran into Vince checking everyone's ID at the front door. Because Vince would want to discuss it on a profound, meaningful, sombre basis, with much intellectual hot air wasted in analysing basic motives. What was Julie's *real* purpose for leaving him and moving in here? Why? Ontological questions, such as Aristotle would have appreciated, teleological issues having to do with what they had once called ‘final causes'. Vince was out of step with the times; this had all become null and void.

I had better call my boss, Chic decided, and tell him -- ask him if -- I can be late today. Should settle this with Julie; what's up, and so forth. How long is she staying and is she going to help pay expenses. Basic unphilosophical questions of practical nature.

He fixed coffee in the kitchen, sat sipping, in his pyjamas.

Turning on the phone he punched his boss's number, Maury Frauenzimmer; the screen turned pale grey, then white, then cloudy as an out-of-focus portion of Maury's anatomy formed. Maury was shaving. ‘Yeah, Chic?'

‘Hey,' Chic said, and heard it sound forth proudly. ‘I got a girl here, Maury, so I'll be late.'

It was male-to-male business. Did not matter who the girl was; no need to go into that. Maury did not bother to ask; he showed on his face the involuntary, genuine admiration, then censure. But -- the admiration came first! Chic grinned; the censure did not bother him.

‘Goddam you,' Maury said, ‘you better get into the office by no later than nine.' His tone said: I wish I were you. I envy you, damn you.

‘Aw,' Chic said, ‘I'll be in, soon as I can.' He glanced towards the bedroom and Julie. She was sitting up. Perhaps Maury saw her. Perhaps not. In any case it was time to conclude the conversation. ‘So long Maury, old man,' Chic said. And rang off.

‘Who was that? Julie said sleepily. ‘Was that Vince?'

‘No. My boss.' Chic put on the coffee water for her.

‘Hi,' he said, walking back into the bedroom and seating himself on the bed beside her. ‘How are you?'

‘I forgot my comb,' Julie said, pragmatically.

‘I'll buy you one from the hall dispenser.'

‘Those measly little plastic things.'

‘Um,' he said, feeling fond of her, feeling sentimental. The situation, she in bed, he sitting beside her in his pyjamas -- it was a bittersweet situation, reminding him of his own previous last marriage of four months ago. ‘Hi,' he said, patting her on the thigh.

‘Aw god,' Julie said. ‘I wish I was dead.' She did not say it accusingly, as if it was his fault, or even as if she meant it passionately; it was as if she were resuming a conversation from the night before. ‘What is the purpose of it all, Chic?' she said. ‘I like Vince, but he's so goofy; he'll never grow up and really bear down at the business of living. He's always playing his games of being the embodiment of modern organized social life, the estab-man, pure and simple, whereas actually he's not. But he's young.' She sighed. It was a sigh that chilled Chic because it was a cold, cruel, utterly dismissing sigh. She was writing off another human being, severing herself from Vince with as little spilled emotion as if she had returned a book borrowed from the building's library.

Good grief, Chic thought, this man was your husband.

You were in love with him. You slept with him, lived with him, knew all there was to know about him -- in fact knew him better than I can, and he's been my brother for longer than you've been alive. Women down underneath, he thought, are tough. Terribly tough.

‘I, uh, have to get to work,' Chic said, nervously.

‘Is that coffee you have on for me, in there?'

‘Oh yeah. Sure!'

‘Bring it here, then, will you, Chic?'

He went to get the coffee, while she dressed.

‘Did old Kalbfleisch make his speech this morning?' Julie asked.

‘I dunno.' It hadn't occurred to him to turn on the TV, although he had read in the paper last night that the speech was due. He didn't give a damn what the old man had to say, about anything.

‘Do you really have to trot off to your little company and go to work?' She eyed him steadily and he saw, for what perhaps was the first time in his life, that she had lovely natural colour in her eyes, a polished slab texture of rock-smoothness and brilliance that needed the natural daylight for it to be brought out. She had, too, an odd, square jaw and a slightly large mouth with a tendency to turn down, tragedy-mask like, with her lips unnaturally red and lush, drawing attention away from her rather drably-coloured hair. She had a nice figure, rounded, pleasant, and she dressed well; that is, she looked

splendid in whatever she wore. Clothes seemed to fit her, even mass-produced cotton dresses that other women would have difficulty with. Now she stood wearing the same olive-coloured dress with round black buttons which she had worn the night before, a cheap dress, really, and yet in it she looked elegant; there was no other word for it. She had an aristocratic carriage and bone-structure. It showed her jaw, her nose, her excellent teeth. She was not German but she was Nordic, perhaps Swedish or Danish. He thought, as he glanced at her, that she looked fine.

It seemed to him certain that she would hold together well over the years, not deteriorate; she seemed to be unbreakable. He could not imagine her getting sloppy or fat or dull.

'I'm hungry,' Julie said.

'You mean you want me to fix breakfast.' He perceived that; no doubt, there.

'I've fixed all the breakfasts I'm going to fix for any man, you or your dumb kid brother,' Julie said.

Again he experienced fear. She was being too harsh, too soon; he knew her, knew she was this way -- but couldn't it be glossed over, at least for a while? Was she going to bring to him whatever her last mood with Vince had been? Wasn't there going to be a honeymoon? *I think I'm in trouble,* he thought to himself. I've got hold of just too much here; I'm not up to it. God, maybe she'll move on; I hope so. It was a childish hope, very regressive, not grown-up, masculine. No real man ever felt this way, he realized that.

'I'll fix breakfast,' he said, and went into the kitchen to do so. Julie stood at the bedroom mirror, combing her hair.

Curtly, in his usual brisk tone, Garth McRae said, 'Shut it off.' The Kalbfleisch simulacrum stopped. Its arms struck out rigid in their final gesture, the withered face vacuous. The simulacrum said nothing and automatically the TV cameras also shut off, one by one; there was no longer anything for them to transmit, and the technicians behind them, all of them *Ges,* knew it. They looked to Garth McRae.

'We got the message across,' McRae informed Anton Karp.

'Well done,' Karp said. 'This Bertold Goltz, this Sons of Job man, makes me nervous; I think the speech here now this morning will dispel a little of that, my legitimate fear.'

He glanced timidly at McRae for confirmation, as did the others in the control room, the simulacrum engineers from the Karp Werke.

'This is only the start,' McRae said presently.

'True,' Karp agreed, nodding. 'But a good start.' Walking up to the Kalbfleisch simulacrum he touched it gingerly on the shoulder, as if expecting it, prodded, to resume its activity. It did not.

McRae laughed.

'I wish,' Anton Karp said, 'that it had mentioned Adolf Hitler; you know, comparing the Sons of Job to the Nazis more directly, comparing Goltz to Hitler.'

'But,' McRae said, 'that would not have helped. True as it may be. You're not authentically a political person, Karp; what gives you the idea that 'the truth' is the best story to stick to? If we want to stop Bertold Goltz we don't want to identify him as another Hitler simply because in their secret hearts fifty-one per cent of the local population would like to see another Hitler.' He smiled at Karp, who looked worried, who looked, in fact, tremulous and apprehensive.

'What I want to know,' Karp said, 'is this: is Kalbfleisch going to be able to handle the Sons of Job? You have von Lessinger equipment; tell me.'

'No,' McRae said. 'He won't be able to.'

Karp gaped at him.

'But,' McRae said, 'Kalbfleisch is going to go. Soon. Within the next month.' He did not say what Karp at once wanted him to say, what Anton and Felix Karp and the entire Karp Werke instinctively inquired into as a first reflex, an immediate query of primary magnitude.

Will we build the next simulacrum? Karp would have asked, had he dared, but he was afraid to speak. Karp was, as McRae knew, a coward. His integrity had long ago been emasculated in order that he be capable of functioning properly within the German business community; spiritual -- moral emasculation was a present day prerequisite for participation in the *Ge* class, in the ruling circles.

I could tell him, McRae thought. Ease his pain. But why? He did not like Karp, who had built and now maintained the simulacrum, kept it functioning as it had to function -- without even a trace of hesitation. Any failure would have betrayed to the *Bes* the secret, the Geheimnis, which distinguished the elite, the establishment of the United States of Europe and America; their possession of the one or more secrets made them into Geheimnistrager, bearers of the secret, rather than Befehltrager, mere carry-outer of instructions.

But all this to McRae was Germanic mysticism; he preferred to think of it in simple practical terms. Karp u.

Sohnen Werke was capable of building simulacra, had as an example built Kalbfleisch and done a good job of it, as well as a good job of maintaining this der Alte during his reign. However, another firm would construct the next der Alte equally well, and by eradicating the economic ties with Karp, the government cut the vast cartel out of participation in the economic privileges which it now enjoyed ... to the government's loss.

The next firm which built a simulacrum for the government of the

USEA would be a small firm, one which the authorities could control.

The name which came to McRae's mind was Frauenzimmer Associates, an extremely small, marginal firm barely surviving in the field of sun-con: simulacra construction for planetary colonization.

He did not tell Anton Karp this, but he intended to open business discussions with Maurice Frauenzimmer, the head of the firm, any day now. And it would surprise Frauenzimmer, too; he did not know either.

Karp said thoughtfully, eyeing McRae, 'What do you think Nicole will say?'

Smiling, McRae said, 'I think she'll be glad. She never really liked old Rudi.'

'I thought she did.' Karp looked chagrined.

'The First Lady,' McRae said acidly, 'has never liked a der Alte yet. Why should she? After all ... she's twenty-three and Kalbfleisch was, according to our informational poop-sheets, seventy-eight.'

Karp bleated, 'But what does she have to do with him? Nothing. Just appear at a reception very seldom, just every now and then!'

'I think that Nicole in general detests the old, the outworn, the useless,' McRae said, not sparing Anton Karp; he saw the middle-aged businessman wince. 'That is a good shorthand description of your chief product,' he added.

'But the specifications -- '

'You could have made it a trifle more -- ' McRae searched for the word, 'fascinating.'

'Enough,' Karp said, flushing, knowing now that McRae was merely tormenting him, that all this was simply to drive home the point that as large and powerful as it was, Karp u. Sohnen Werke was a servant, only an employee, of the government; it did not really influence it, and even McRae, who was simply an Assistant Secretary of State, could take a stand of this sort with impunity.

'If you ran things once more,' McRae drawled reflectively, 'how would you alter matters? Go back to hiring concentration camp victims, as Krupp did during the twentieth century? Perhaps you could obtain and use von Lessinger equipment for that ... letting them die even faster, as your employees, than they died at Belsen-Belsen -- '

Karp turned and strode off. He was trembling.

Grinning, McRae lit a cigar. An American, not a German-Dutch, variety.

4

EME's top recording technician watched in amazement as Nat Flieger carried the Ampek F-a2 to the ‘copter. ‘You're going to catch him on *that?'*

Jim Planck groaned. ‘My god, the F-a2 was obsolete *last* year!'

‘If you can't operate it -- ‘ Nat said.

‘I can,' Planck muttered. ‘I've run wormies before; I just feel that -- ‘ He gestured in dismay. ‘I suppose you're using an old-tune carbon type mike along with it.'

‘Hardly,' Nat said. Good-naturedly, he spalled Planck on the back; he had known him for years and was used to *him.*

‘Don't worry. We'll get along fine.'

‘Listen,' Planck said in a low voice, glancing around. ‘It is really a fact that Leo's daughter is coming with us on this trip?'

‘It's really a fact.'

‘That Molly Dondoldo always meant complications -- you know what I refer to? Naw, you don't. Nat, I don't have any idea what your relationship to Molly is these days, but -- ‘

‘You worry about recording Richard Kongrosian,' Nat said shortly.

‘Sure, sure.' Planck shrugged. ‘It's your life and job and your project, Nat; I'm just a wage-slave, doing what you tell me.' He ran a nervous, shaky hand through his thinning, slightly shiny black hair. ‘Are we ready to go?'

Molly had already got into the ‘copter; she sat reading a book, ignoring the two of them. She wore a brightly coloured cotton blouse and shorts and Nat thought to himself how inappropriate her dress would be for the rain-drenched forests into which they were going. Such a radically different climate; he wondered if Molly had ever been north before. The Oregon-Northern California region had lost much of its population during the fracas of 1980; it had been heavily hit by Red Chinese guided missiles, and of course the clouds of fallout had blanketed it in the subsequent decade. They had in fact not entirely dissipated yet.

But the level had been pronounced by NASA technicians as lying within the safe tolerance.

Lush growth, tangled variants created by the fallout ... the forestation had an almost tropical quality now, Nat knew. And the rain virtually never ceased; it had been frequent and heavy before 1990 and now it was torrential.

‘Ready,' he said to Jim Planck.

An unlit Alta Camina cigar jutting from between his teeth, Planck said, ‘Then away we go, us and your pet worm. To record the greatest

handless piano player of the century. Hey, I got a joke, Nat. One day Richard Kongrosian is in a pub-trans accident; he's all battered up in the wreck, and when they take the bandages off *he's grown hands.'*

Planck chuckled. 'And so he can never play again.'

Lowering her book, Molly said frigidly, *'Be* entertainment, is that what it's going to be on this flight?'

Planck coloured, bent to fumble with his recording gear, checking it automatically. 'Sorry, Miss Dondoldo,' he said, but he did not sound sorry; he sounded chokingly resentful.

'Just start up the 'copter,' Molly said. And returned to reading her book. It was, Nat saw, a banned text by the twentieth-century sociologist C. Wright Mills. Molly Dondoldo, he reflected, no more a *Ge* than he or Jim Planck, had no anxiety over publicly reading an item forbidden to their class. A remarkable woman in many ways, he thought with admiration.

He said to her, 'Don't be so harsh, Molly.'

Without glancing up, Molly said, 'I hate *Be* wit.'

The 'copter started; guiding it expertly, Jim Planck soon had them in the air. They moved north, over the coastal highway and the Imperial Valley with its criss-crossed endless miles of canals stretching as far as one could see.

'It's going to be a cosy flight,' Nat said to Molly. 'I can make that out already.'

Molly murmured, 'Don't you have to sprinkle your worm or something? Frankly I'd prefer to be left alone if you don't mind.'

'What do you know about the personal tragedy in Kongrosian's life?' Nat asked her.

She was silent a moment and then she said, 'It has something to do with the fallout of the late '90s. I think it's his son. But no one knows for certain; I have no inside information, Nat. They say, though, that his son is a monster.'

Once more Nat felt the chill of fear which he had experienced at the idea of visiting Kongrosian's home.

'Don't let it get you down,' Molly said. 'After all, there've been so many special births since the fallout of the '90s. Don't you see them meandering about all the time? I do. Maybe, though, you prefer not to look.'

She shut her book, marking the place with a dogear. 'It's the price we pay for our otherwise unblemished lives. My god, Nat, you can adjust to that *thing,* that Ampek recorder, and that positively gives me the creeps, all shimmering and alive like it is. Perhaps the child's deformation is due to factors derived from his father's Psionic faculty; maybe Kongrosian blames himself, not the fallout. Ask him when you get there.'

‘Ask him!' Nat echoed, appalled.

‘Certainly. Why not?'

‘It's a hell of an idea,' Nat said. And, as frequently in the past in his relations with Molly, it seemed to him that she was an exceptionally harsh and aggressive, almost masculine woman; there was a bluntness in her which did not much appeal to him. And on top of that Molly was far too intellectually oriented; she lacked her father's personal, emotional touch.

‘Why did you want to come on this trip?' he asked her. Certainly not to hear Kongrosian play; that was obvious. Perhaps it had to do with the son, the special child; Molly would be attracted to that. He felt revulsion, but he did not show it; he managed to smile back at her.

‘I enjoy Kongrosian,' Molly said placidly. ‘It would be very gratifying to meet him personally and listen to him play.'

Nat said, ‘But I've heard you say there's no market right now for Psionic versions of Brahms and Schumann.'

‘Aren't you able, Nat, to separate your *personal* life from company business? My own individual tastes run to Kongrosian's style, but that doesn't mean I think he'll sell. You know, Nat, we've done rather well with all sub-types of folk music for the last few years. I'd tend to say that performers like Kongrosian, however popular they may be at the White House, are anachronisms and we must be highly alert that we don't step backward into economic ruin with them.' She smiled at him, looking lazily for his reaction. ‘I'll tell you another reason I wanted to come. You and I can spend a good deal of time together, tormenting each other. Just you and me, on a trip ... we can stay at a motel in Jenner. Did you think of that?' Nat took a deep, unsteady breath.

Her smile increased. It was as if she were actually laughing at him, he thought. Molly could handle him, make him do what she wanted; they both knew that and it amused her. ‘Do you want to marry me?' Molly asked him. ‘Are your intentions honourable, in the old twentieth-century sense?'

Nat said, ‘Are yours?'

She shrugged. ‘Maybe I like monsters. I like *you,* Nat, you and your worm-like F-a2 recording machine that you nourish and pamper, like a wife or a pet or both.'

‘I'd do the same for you,' Nat said. All at once he felt Jim Planck watching him and he concentrated on watching the earth below them. It obviously embarrassed Jim, this exchange. Planck was an engineer, a man who worked with his body -- a mere *Be* as Molly had called him, but a good man. Talk of this sort was tough on Jim.

And, Nat thought, on me. The only one of us who really enjoys it is Molly. And she really does; it's not an affectation.

The autobahn fatigued Chic Strikerock, with its centrally-controlled cars and wheels spinning up invisible runnels in massed procession. In his own individual car he felt as if he were participating in a black-magic ritual -- as if he and the other commuters had put their lives into the hands of a force better left undiscussed. Actually it was a simple homeostatic beam which justified its position by making ceaseless references to all other vehicles and the guide-walls of the road itself, but he was not amused. He sat in his car reading the morning New York *Times*.

He kept his attention on the newspaper instead of the grinding, never-stopping environment which surrounded him, meditating on an article dealing with a further discovery of unicellular fossils on Ganymede.

Old-time civilization, Chic said to himself. The next layer down, just on the verge of being uncovered by the autoshovels operating in the airless, near-weightless void of midspace, of the big-planet moons.

We're being robbed, he decided. The next layer down will be comic books, contraceptives, empty Coke bottles. But they -- the authorities -- won't tell us. Who wants to find out that the entire solar system has been exposed to Coca Cola over a period of two million years? It was, for him, impossible to imagine a civilization -- of any kind of life form that had not contrived Coke. Otherwise, how could if authentically be called a ‘civilization'? But then he thought, I'm letting my bitterness get the better of me. Maury won't like it; better curb it before I arrive. Bad for business. And we must have business as usual. That's the watchword of the day -- if not of the century. After all, that's really ail that separates me from my younger brother: my ability to face fundamentals and not get lost in the maze of external rituals.

If Vince could do that then he'd be me.

And he'd perhaps have his wife back.

And Vince would have been in on Maury Frauenzimmer's scheme, put by Maury to Sepp von Lessinger in person at a conference of ersatz engineers in New York in 2023, to make use of von Lessinger's time travel experiments to send a psychiatrist back to 1925 to cure Fuhrer Hitler of his paranoia. As a matter of fact, von Lessinger had made some attempt in that direction, apparently, but the *Ges* kept the results to themselves -- of course. Leave it to the *Ges* to protect their privileged status, Chic thought to himself. And now von Lessinger was dead.

Something sizzled to the right of him. A commercial, made by Theodorus Nitz, the worst house of all, had attached itself to his car.

‘Get off,' he warned it. But the commercial, well-adhered, began to crawl, buffeted by the wind, towards the door and the entrance crack. It would soon have squeezed in and would be haranguing him

in the cranky, garbagey fashion of the Nitz advertisements.

He could, as it came through the crack, kill it. It was alive, terribly mortal; the ad agencies, like nature, squandered hordes of them.

The commercial, fly-sized, began to buzz out its message as soon as it managed to force entry. ‘Say! Haven't you sometimes said to yourself, I'll bet other people in restaurants can see me! And you're puzzled as to what to do about this serious, baffling problem of being conspicuous, especially -- ‘

Chic crushed it with his foot.

The card told Nicole Thibodeaux that the Prime Minister of Israel had arrived at the White House and now waited in the Camellia Room. Emil Stark, slender, tall, always knowing the latest Jewish joke (‘One day God met Jesus and Jesus was wearing -- ‘ or however it went; she could not remember -- she was too sleepy). Anyhow, today she had a joke for him. The Wolff Commission had brought in its report.

Later, in a robe and slippers, she drank coffee, read the morning *Times,* then pushed the paper away and picked up the document which the Wolff Commission had presented her. Whom had they selected? Hermann Goering; she leafed through the pages and wished she could fire General Wolff.

The army brass had picked the man in the Age of Barbarism to deal with; she knew that, but the Washington authorities had agreed to follow General Wolff's recommendation, not realizing at the time what a typical military fathead he was.

It demonstrated the power of the army's GHQ within purely political areas, these days.

She called to Leonore, her secretary, ‘Tell Emil Stark to come on in.' No use delaying it; anyhow Stark probably would be pleased. Like so many others, the Israeli Prune Minister no doubt imagined that Goering had been a simple clown. Nicole laughed sharply. They hadn't digested the War Crimes Trial documents of World War Two, if they believed that.

‘Mrs Thibodeaux,' Stark said, appearing, smiling.

‘It's Goering,' Nicole said.

‘Of course.' Stark continued to smile.

‘You damn fool,' she said. ‘He's too smart for any of us -- don't you know that? If we try to do business with him -- ‘

‘But towards the end of the war Goering lost favour,' Stark said urbanely, seating himself at the table facing her. ‘He was involved in the losing military campaign, whereas the Gestapo people and those close to Hitler gained in power, Bormann and Himmler and Eichmann, the blackshirts. Goering would understand -- did understand -- what

losing the military part of the Party's campaign meant.'

Nicole was silent. She felt irritable.

'Does this bother you?' Stark said smoothly. 'I know I find it difficult. But we have a simple enough proposition to put to the Reichsmarschall, don't we? It can be phrased in a single sentence, and he'll understand it.'

'Oh yes,' she agreed. 'Goering will understand. He'll also understand that if we're turned down we'll accept less, then even less that that, finally -- ' She broke off. 'Yes, this does bother me. I think that von Lessinger was right in his final summation: *no one should go near the Third Reich.* When you deal with psychotics you're drawn in; you become mentally ill yourself.'

Stark said quietly, 'There are six million Jewish lives to be saved, Mrs Thibodeaux.'

Sighing, Nicole said, 'All right!' She eyed him with harsh anger, but the Israeli Premier met her gaze; he was not afraid of her. It was not customary for him to cringe before anyone; he had come a long way to this post, and success for him would not have been possible if he had been made any other way but this. His was not a position for a coward; Israel was -- had always been -- a small nation, existing among huge blocks that could, at any given moment, efface her. Stark even smiled back slightly; or did she imagine it? Her anger increased. She felt impotent.

'We need not settle this matter right now,' Stark said, then. 'I'm sure you have other matters on your mind, Mrs Thibodeaux. Planning the evening White House entertainment, perhaps. I received an invitation,' Stark tapped his coat pocket, 'as I'm sure you're aware. We are promised a fine parade of talent, are we not? But that is always true.'

His voice was a murmur, gentle and soothing. 'May I smoke?' From his pocket he brought a little flat gold case from which he removed a cigar. 'I am trying these for the first time. Philippine cigars, made from Isabela leaf. Handmade, as a matter of fact.'

'Go ahead,' Nicole said grumpily.

'Does Herr Kalbfleisch smoke?' Stark inquired.

'No,' Nicole said.

'He does not enjoy your musical evenings either, does he? That is a bad sign. Recall Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar.* Something about "I distrust him for he hath no music." Recall? "He hath no music" Does this describe the present der Alte? I have never met him, unfortunately. In any case it is a pleasure to deal with you, Mrs Thibodeaux; believe me.' Emil Stark's eyes were grey, extremely bright.

'Thanks,' Nicole groaned, wishing he would leave. She felt his

domination of their colloquy and it made her weary and restless.

'You know,' Stark continued, 'it is very difficult for us for us Israelis -- to deal with Germans; I would no doubt have difficulty with Herr Kalbfleisch.' He puffed cigar smoke; the smell made her wrinkle her nose with distaste.

'This one resembles the first der Alte, Herr Adenauer, or so I gather from history tapes shown me as a boy in school. It is interesting to realize that he ruled far longer than the entire period of the Third Reich ... which was intended to last a thousand years.'

'Yes,' she said, dully.

'And perhaps, if we assist it through von Lessinger's system, we will enable it to do so.' His eyes were oblique, now.

'You think so? And yet you're still willing to -- '

'I think,' Emil Stark said, 'that if the Third Reich is given the weapons it needs it will survive its victory by perhaps five years -- and very possibly not even that long. It's doomed by its very nature; there's absolutely no mechanism in the Nazi Party by which a successor to der Fuhrer can be produced. Germany will fragment, become a collection of small, nasty, quarrelling states as it was before Bismark. My government is convinced of this, Mrs Thibodeaux. Remember Hess's introduction of Hitler at one of the great Party rallies. "Hitler ist Deutschland." "Hitler is Germany." He was correct. Hence after Hitler what? The deluge. And Hitler knew it. As a matter of fact, there is some possibility that Hitler *deliberately* led his people to defeat. But that is a rather convoluted psychoanalytic theory. I personally find it too baroque for credence.'

Nicole said thoughtfully, 'If Hermann Goering is brought out of his period, here to us, do you want to confront him and participate in the discussions?'

'Yes,' Stark said. 'In fact I insist on it.'

'You -- ' She stared at him.

'Insist?'

Stark nodded.

'I suppose,' Nicole said, 'that's because you're the spiritual embodiment of World Jewry or of some such mystic entity as that.'

'Because I am an official,' Stark answered, 'of the State of Israel, its highest official, in fact.' He was silent then.

'Is it true,' Nicole asked, 'that your people are about to launch a probe to Mars?'

'Not a probe,' Stark said. 'A transport. We will set up our first kibbutz there, one of these days. Mars is, so to speak, one great Negev. We will have orange trees growing some day.'

'Lucky little people,' Nicole said, under her breath.

'Pardon?' Stark cupped his ear; he had not heard.

‘You're lucky. You have aspirations. What we have in the USEA is -- ‘ She reflected. ‘Norms. Standards. It's very mundane, and I don't mean that as a pun having to do with space travel. Damn you, Stark -- you rattle me. I don't know why.'

‘You should visit Israel,' Stark said. ‘It would interest you. For instance -- ‘

‘For instance I could become converted,' Nicole said. ‘Change my name to Rebecca. Listen, Stark; I've talked long enough with you. I don't enjoy this Wolff Report business -- I think it's too risky, this idea of tinkering with the past on a grand scale, even if it might mean saving six or eight or even ten million innocent human lives. Look what happened when we tried to send assassins back to kill Adolf Hitler in the early days of his career; something or someone baulked us every time, and we tried seven times! I know I'm convinced -- that it was agents from the future, from our time or past our time. If one can play with von Lessinger's system, two can. The bomb in the beerhall, the bomb in the prop plane -- ‘

‘But this attempt,' Stark said, ‘will *delight* neo-Nazi elements. You will have their co-operation.'

Nicole said bitterly, ‘And that's supposed to ease my worry? You, of all people, should see what a malign harbinger that is.'

For an interval Stark said nothing; he smoked his Philippine handmade cigar and regarded her sombrely. Then he shrugged. ‘I will bow out. I think, Mrs Thibodeaux, at this point. Perhaps you are right. I'd like to ponder this and also confer with other members on my staff. I'll see you at the musicale tonight, here at the White house then. Will there be any Bach or Handel? I enjoy both composers.'

‘We'll have an all-Israeli night, just for you,' Nicole said.

‘Mendelssohn, Mahler, Bloch, Copeland; all right?' She smiled, and Emil Stark smiled back.

‘Is there a copy of General Wolff's report which I can take?' Stark asked.

‘No.' She shook her head. ‘It's Geheimnis -- top secret.'

Stark raised an eyebrow. And ceased smiling.

‘Even Kalbfleisch is not going to see it,' Nicole said.

She did not intend to budge in her position, and Emil Stark could undoubtedly perceive that. After all, the man was professionally astute. Going to her desk she seated herself. Waiting for him to go, expecting him to, she sat examining a folio of abstracts which had been placed for her attention by her secretary, Leonore. They were boring -- or were they? She read the top abstract once more, carefully.

It informed her that White House talent scout Janet Raimer had been unable to sign the great morbidly-neurotic concert pianist Richard Kongrosian for tonight after all, because Kongrosian had

suddenly left his summer home at Jenner and gone voluntarily into a sanatorium for electron-shock therapy. And no one was supposed to know.

Goddam, Nicole said to herself, bitterly. Well, that puts an end to this evening; I might as well go to bed right after dinner. For Kongrosian was not only the foremost interpreter of Brahms and Chopin but was in addition an eccentric flashing, colossal wit.

Emil Stark puffed on his cigar, regarding her with curiosity.

'Does the name "Richard Kongrosian" mean anything to you?' she demanded, looking up.

'Certainly. For certain Romantic composers -- '

'He's sick again. Mentally. For the hundredth time. Or didn't you know about that? Hadn't you heard the rumours?' Furiously she spun the abstract away from her; it slipped to the floor. 'Sometimes I wish he would finally kill himself or die from a perforated colon or whatever it is he's really got. This week.'

'Kongrosian is a major artist.' Stark nodded. 'I can appreciate your concern. And in these chaotic times, with such elements as the Sons of Job parading in the streets, and all the vulgarity and mediocrity which seems ready to rise up and reassert itself -- '

'Those creatures,' Nicole said quietly, 'will not last long. So worry about something else.'

'You believe you understand the situation, then. And have it firmly under control.' Stark permitted himself a brief, cold grimace.

'Bertold Goltz is as *Be* as it's possible to be. *Out, un* and *Be;* he's all three. He's a joke. A clown.'

'Like Goering, perhaps?'

Nicole said nothing. But her eyes flickered; Stark saw that, the sudden, temporary doubt. He grimaced again, this time involuntarily. A grimace of concern. Nicole shuddered.

5

In the little building at the back of Jalopy Jungle Number Three, Al Miller sat with his feet up on the desk, smoking an Upmann cigar and watching passers-by, the sidewalk and people and stores of downtown Reno, Nevada. Beyond the gleam of the new jalopies parked with flapping banners and streamers cascading from them he saw a shape waiting, hiding beneath the huge sign that spelled out LOONY LUKE.

And he was not the only person to see the shape; along the sidewalk came a man and woman with a small boy trotting ahead of them, and the boy, with an exclamation, hopped up and down, gesturing excitedly. 'Hey, Dad, look! You know what it is? Look, *it's the papoola.'*

'By golly,' the man said with a grin, 'so it is. Look, Marion, there's one of those Martian creatures hiding there under the sign. What do you say we go over and chat with it?' He started in that direction, along with the boy. The woman, however, continued along the sidewalk.

'Come on, Mom!' the boy urged.

In his office, Al Miller lightly touched the controls of the mechanism within his shirt. The papoola emerged from beneath the LOONY LUKE sign, and Al caused it to waddle on its six stubby legs towards the sidewalk, its round, silly hat slipping over one antenna, its eyes crossing and uncrossing as it made out the sight of the woman. The tropism being established, the papoola trudged after her, to the delight of the boy and his father.

'Look, Dad, it's following Mom! Hey Mom! Hey Mom, turn around and see!'

The woman glanced back, saw the platter-like organism with its orange bug-shaped body, and she laughed.

Everybody loves the papoola, Al thought to himself. See the funny Martian papoola. Speak, papoola; say hello to the nice lady who's laughing at you.

The thoughts of the papoola, directed at the woman, reached Al. It was greeting her, telling her how nice it was to meet her, soothing and coaxing her until she came back up the sidewalk towards it, joining her boy and husband so that now all three of them stood together, receiving the mental impulses emanating from the Martian creature which had come here to Earth with no hostile plans, no capacity to cause trouble. The papoola loved them, too, just as they loved it; it told them so right now -- it conveyed to them the gentleness, the warm hospitality which it was accustomed to on its

own planet.

What a wonderful place Mars must be, the man and woman were no doubt thinking, as the papoola poured out its recollections, its attitude. Gosh, it's not cold and schizoid, like Earth society; nobody spies on anybody else, grades their endless relpol tests, reports on them to building Security Committees week in, week out. Think of it, the papoola was telling them as they stood rooted to the sidewalk, unable to pass on. You're your own boss, there, free to work your farm land, believe your own beliefs, become *yourself*.

Look at you, afraid even to stand here listening. Afraid to.

In a nervous voice the man said to his wife, 'We'd better ... go.'

'Oh no,' the boy said pleadingly. 'I mean, gee, how often do you get to talk to a papoola? It must belong to that jalopy jungle there.' The boy pointed, and Al found himself under the man's keen, observing scrutiny.

The man said, 'Of course. They brought it here to sell jalopies. It's working on us right now, softening us up.' The enchantment visibly faded from his face. 'There's the fellow sitting in there operating it.'

But the papoola thought, what I tell you is still true. Even if it is a sales pitch. You could go there, to Mars, yourself. You and your family can see with your own eyes -- if you have the courage to break free. Can you do it? Are you a real man? Buy a Loony Luke jalopy; buy it while you still have the chance, because you know that some day, maybe not so long from now, the NP is going to crack down. And there will be no more jalopy jungles. No more crack in the wall of the authoritarian society through which a few -- a few lucky people -- can escape.

Fiddling with the controls at his mid-section, Al turned up the gain. The force of the papoola's psyche increased, drawing the man in, taking control of him. You must buy a jalopy, the papoola urged. Easy payment plan, service warranty, many models to choose from. This is the time to sign; don't delay. The man took a step towards the lot. Hurry the papoola told him. Any second now the authorities may close down the lot and your opportunity will be gone forever.

'This -- is how they work it,' the man said with difficulty. 'The animal snares people. Hypnosis. We have to leave.' But he did not leave; it was too late: he was going to buy a jalopy, and Al, in the office with his control box, was reeling the man in.

Leisurely, Al rose to his feet. Time to go out and close the deal. He shut off the papoola, opened the office door and stepped outside on to the lot. And he saw a once-familiar figure threading its way among the jalopies, towards him. It was his one-time buddy, Ian Duncan and he had not seen him in years. Good grief, Al thought. What's he want? And at a time like this!

‘Al,' Ian Duncan called, gesturing. ‘Can I talk with you a second? You're not too busy, are you?' Perspiring and pale, he came closer, looking about in a frightened way. He had deteriorated since Al had last seen him.

‘Listen,' Al said, with anger. But already it was too late; the couple and their boy had broken away and were moving rapidly on down the sidewalk.

‘I didn't, um, mean to bother you,' Ian mumbled.

‘You're not bothering me,' Al said as he gloomily watched the three prospects depart. ‘Well, what's the trouble, Ian? You sure as hell don't look very well. Are you sick? Come on inside the office.' He led him inside and shut the door.

Ian said, ‘I came across my jug. Remember when we were trying to make it to the White House? Al, we have to try once more. Honest to god, I can't go on like this. I can't stand to be a failure at what we agreed was the most important thing in our lives.' Panting, he mopped at his forehead with his handkerchief, his hands trembling.

‘I don't even have my jug any more,' Al said presently.

‘You must. Well, we could each record our parts separately on my jug and then synthesize them on one tape, and present that to the White House. This trapped feeling, I don't know if I can go on living with it. I have to get back to playing. If we started practising right now on the "Goldberg Variations" in two months we -- ‘

Al broke in, ‘You still live at that place? That big Abraham Lincoln establishment?'

Ian nodded.

‘And you still have that job with that Bavarian cartel? You're still a gear inspector?' He could not understand why Ian Duncan was so upset. ‘Hell, if worst comes to worst you can emigrate. Jug-playing is out of the question. I haven't played for years, since I last saw you, in fact. Just a minute.'

He dialled the knobs of the mechanism which controlled the papoola; near the sidewalk the creature responded and began to return slowly to its spot beneath the sign.

Seeing it, Ian said, ‘I thought they were all dead.'

‘They are,' Al said.

‘But that one out there moves and -- ‘

‘It's a fake,' Al said, ‘a simulacrum, like those things they use for colonizing. I control it.' He showed his old-time buddy the control box. ‘It brings in people off the sidewalk. Actually, Luke is supposed to have a genuine one on which these are modelled. Nobody knows for sure and the law can't touch Luke. The NP can't make him cough up the real one, if he does have it.' Al seated himself and lit his pipe. ‘Tail your relpol test,' he said to Ian. ‘Lose your apartment and get back

your original deposit. Bring me the money and I'll see that you get a damn fine jalopy that'll take you to Mars. How about it?'

'I tried to fail my test,' Ian said, 'but they won't let me. They doctored the results. They don't want me to get away. They won't let me go.'

'Who's "they"?'

'The man in the next apartment at The Abraham Lincoln. Edgar Stone, his name is -- I think. He did it deliberately. I saw the expression on his face. Maybe he imagined he was doing me a favour ... I don't know.' He glanced around him. 'This is a nice little office you have here. You sleep in it, don't you? And when it moves, you move with it.'

'Yes,' Al said, 'we're always prepared to take off.' The NP had almost got him a number of times, even though the lot could obtain orbital velocity in six minutes. The papoola detected their approach, but not sufficiently far in advance for a comfortable escape; generally it was hurried and disorganized, with part of his inventory of jalopies being left behind.

'You're barely one jump ahead of them,' Ian mused. 'And yet, it doesn't bother you. I guess it's all in your attitude.'

'If they get me,' Al said, 'Luke will bail me out.' So what did he have to worry about? His employer was a powerful man; the Thibodeaux clan limited their attacks on him to deep-think articles in popular magazines harping on Luke's vulgarity and the shoddiness of his jalopies.

'I envy you,' Ian said. 'Your poise. Your calmness.'

'Doesn't your building have a skypilot? Go talk to him.'

Ian said bitterly, 'That's no good. Right now it's Patrick Doyle and he's as badly off as I am. And Don Tishman, our chairman, is even worse off; he's a bundle of nerves. In fact our whole building is shot through with anxiety. Maybe it has to do with Nicole's sinus headaches.

Glancing at him, Al saw that he was actually serious. The White House and all it stood for meant that much to him; it still dominated his life, as it had years ago when they had been buddies in the Service. 'For your sake,' Al said quietly, 'I'll get my jug out and practice. We'll make one more try.

Speechless, Ian Duncan gaped at him.

'I mean it,' Al said, nodding.

With gratitude, Ian whispered, 'God bless you, Al.'

Sombrely, Al Miller puffed on his pipe.

Ahead of Chic Strikerock the small factory at which he worked grew to its full but meagre proportion; this was as large as it was going to get -- this hatbox-like structure -- of late a light green,

modern enough if one's standards were not too critical. Frauenzimmer Associates. Soon he would be in his office, at work, and fussing with the blinds of the window in an effort to restrict the bright morning sun. Fussing, too, at Miss Greta Trupe, the elderly lady secretary who served both him and Maury.

It's a great life, Chic thought. But perhaps, since yesterday, the firm had gone into receivership; it would not have surprised him -- and it probably would not have much saddened him, either. Although, of course, it would be a shame for Maury, and he liked Maury, despite their ubiquitous clashes. After all, a small firm was much like a small family. Everyone rubbed elbows in close, personal fashion and on many psychological levels. It was much more elaborately intimate than the depersonalized human relationship held by employees and employers of cartel-sized Operations.

Frankly, he preferred it. Preferred the closeness. To him there was something horrible about the detached and highly reified bureaucratic interpersonal activity in the halls of the mighty, within the *geheimlich* powerful corporations. The fact that Maury was a small-ltime operator actually appealed to him. It was a bit of the old world, the twentieth century still extant.

In the lot he parked, manually, beside Maury's elderly wheel, got out and walked, hands in his pockets, to the familiar front entrance.

The small cluttered office -- with its heaps of unopened unanswered mail, coffee cups, work manuals and crumpled invoices, tacked-up girly type calendars -- smelled dusty, as if its windows had never at any time been opened to fresh air and the light of day. And, at the far end, taking up most of the available space, he saw four simulacra seated in silence, a group: one in adult male form, its female mate and two children. This was a major item of the firm's catalogue; this was a famnexdo.

The adult male style simulacrum rose and greeted him with civility. ‘Good morning, Mr Strikerock.'

‘Maury arrived yet?' He glanced around.

‘In a limited sense, yes,' the adult male simulacrum answered. ‘He's down the street getting his morning cup of coffee and doughnut.'

‘Jolly,' Chic said, and removed his coat. ‘Well, are you folks all ready to go to Mars?' he asked the simulacra. He hung up his coat.

‘Yes, Mr Strikerock,' the adult female said, nodding.

‘And we're cheerful, too. You can count on that.' Obligingly she smiled in a neighbourly way at him. ‘It will be a relief to leave Earth with its repressive legislation. We were listening OH the FM to the news about the McPhearson Act.'

‘We consider it dreadful,' the adult male said.

‘I have to agree with you,' Chic said. ‘But what can one do?' He

looked around for the mail; as always it was lost somewhere in the mass of clutter.

'One can emigrate,' the adult male simulacrum pointed out.

'Um,' Chic said absently. He had found an unexpected heap of recent-looking bills from parts suppliers; with a feeling of gloom and even terror he began to sort through them. Had Maury seen these? Probably. Seen them and then pushed them away immediately, out of sight. Frauenzimmer Associates functioned better if it was not reminded of such facts of life. Like a regressed neurotic, it had to hide several aspects of reality from its percept system in order to function at all. This was hardly ideal, but what really was the alternative? To be realistic would be to give up, to die. Illusion, of an infantile nature was essential for the tiny firm's survival, or at least so it seemed to him and Maury. In any case both of them had adopted this attitude. Their simulacra -- the adult ones -- disapproved of this; their cold, logical appraisal of reality stood in sharp contrast, and Chic always felt a little naked, a little embarrassed, before the simulacra; he knew he should set a better example for them.

'If you bought a jalopy and emigrated to Mars,' the adult male said, 'We could be the famnexdo for you.'

'I wouldn't need any family next-door,' Chic said, 'if I emigrated to Mars. I'd go to get away from people.

'We'd make a very good family next-door to you,' the female said.

'Look,' Chic said, 'you don't have to lecture me about your virtues. I know more than you do yourselves.' And for good reason. Their presumption, their earnest sincerity, amused but also irked him. As next-door neighbours this group of sims would be something of a nuisance, he reflected. Still, that was what emigrants wanted, in fact needed, out in the sparsely-populated colonial regions. He could appreciate that; after all, it was Frauenzimmer Associates' business to understand.

A man, when he emigrated, could buy neighbours, buy the simulated presence of life, the sound and motion of human activity -- or at least its mechanical near-substitute to bolster his morale in the new environment of unfamiliar stimuli and perhaps, god forbid, no stimuli at all. And in addition to this primary psychological gain there was a practical secondary advantage as well. The famnexdo group of simulacra developed the parcel of land, tilled it and planted it, irrigated it, made it fertile, highly productive. And the yield went to the human settler because the famnexdo group, legally speaking, occupied the peripheral portions of his land. The famnexdo were actually not next-door at all; they were part of their owner's entourage. Communication with them was in essence a circular dialogue with oneself; the famnexdo, it they were functioning

properly, picked up the covert hopes and dreams of the settler and detailed them back in an articulated fashion. Therapeutically, this was helpful, although from a cultural standpoint it was a trifle sterile.

The adult male said respectfully, ‘Here is Mr Frauenzimmer now.'

Glancing up, Chic saw the office door swing slowly open; carefully carrying his cup of coffee and doughnut, Maury appeared.

‘Listen, buddy,' Maury said in a hoarse voice. He was a short, round, perspiring man, like a reflection in a bad mirror. His legs had an inferior look, as if they just barely managed to support him; he teetered as he moved forward.

‘I'm sorry,' he said, ‘but I guess I got to fire you.'

Chic stared at him.

‘I can't make it any longer,' Maury said. Gripping the handle of his coffee cup with his blunt, work-stained fingers he searched for a place to set it and the doughnut down, among the papers and manuals littering the surface of the desk.

‘I'll be darned,' Chic said. In his ears his voice sounded weak.

‘You knew it was coming.' Maury's voice had become a bleak croak. ‘We both did. What else can I do? We haven't turned over a major order in weeks. I'm not blaming you. Understand that. Look at this famnexdo group hanging around here -- just hanging. We should be able to unload them long before now.' Getting out his immense Irish linen handkerchief, Maury mopped his forehead. ‘I'm sorry Chic.' He eyed his employee anxiously.

The adult male simulacrum said, ‘This is indeed a distressing exchange.'

‘I feel the same way,' its mate added.

Glaring at them, Maury spluttered, ‘Tough, I mean, mind your own darn business. Who asked for your artificial, contrived opinion?'

Chic murmured, ‘Leave them alone.' He was stunned at the news; emotionally, he had been caught totally by surprise, despite his intellectual forebodings.

‘If Mr Strikerock goes,' the adult male simulacrum stated, ‘we go with him.'

Sourly, Maury grunted at the simulacra, ‘Aw, what the hell, you're just a bunch of artefacts. Pipe down while we thrash this out. We have enough troubles without you getting involved.' Seating himself at the desk he opened the morning *Chronicle*.

‘The whole world's coming to an end. It's not us, Chic, not just Frauenzimmer Associates. Listen to this item in today's paper: "The body of Orley Short, maintenance man, was discovered today at the bottom of a six-foot vat of gradually hardening chocolate at the St Louis Candy Company."‘ He raised his head. ‘You get that "Gradually hardening chocolate" -- that's it. That's the way we live. I'll continue.

"Short, 53, failed to come home from work yesterday, and -- "'

'Okay,' Chic interrupted. 'I understand what you're trying to say. This is one of those times.'

'Exactly. Conditions are beyond any individual's power. It's when you got to be fatalistic, you know: resigned-like. I'm resigned to seeing Frauenzimmer Associates close forever. Frankly, that's next.' He eyed the famnexdo group of simulacra moodily. 'I don't know why we constructed you fellows. We should have slapped together a gang of street hustlers, floozies with just enough class to interest the bourgeoisie. Listen, Chic, this is how this terrible item in the *Chronicle* ends. You simulacra, you listen, too. It'll give you an idea of the kind of world you've been born into.

"Brother-in-law Antonio Costa drove to the candy factory and discovered him three feet down in the chocolate, St Louis police said."' Maury savagely closed up the newspaper. 'I mean, how are you going to work an event like that into your Weltanschauung? It's just too damn dreadful. It unhinges you. And the worse part is that it's so dreadful it's almost funny.'

There was silence and then the male adult simulacrum, no doubt responding to some aspect of Maury's subconscious, said, 'This is certainly no time for such a bill as the McPhearson Act to come into effect. We require psychiatric help from whatever quarter we can obtain it.'

' "Psychiatric help," ' Maury mocked. 'Yeah, you've put your finger on it, Mr Jones or Smith or whatever we named you. Mr Next-door Neighbour, whoever you are. That would have saved Frauenzimmer Associates -- right? A little psychoanalysis at two hundred dollars an hour for ten years ... isn't that how long it generally takes? Keerist.'

He turned away from the simulacra, disgusted, and ate his doughnut.

Presently Chic said, 'Will you give me a letter of recommendation?'

'Of course,' Maury said.

Maybe I'll have to go to work for Karp und Sohnen, Chic thought. His brother Vince, a *Ge* employee there, could get him put on; it was better than nothing, better than joining the pitiful jobless, the lowest order of the vast *Be* class, nomads who roamed the face of the Earth, now too poor even to emigrate. Or perhaps he should emigrate. Perhaps the time had at last come; he should face it squarely. For once give up the infantile ambitions upon which he had traded for so long.

But Julie. What about her? His brother's wife made matters hopelessly complex; for example was he now responsible financially for her? He would have to thrash it out with Vince, meet him face to face. In any case. Whether he sought a position with Karp u. Sohnen

Werke or not.

It would be awkward, to say the least, approaching Vince under these circumstances; the business with Julie had happened at a bad time.

'Listen, Maury,' Chic said. 'You can't lay me off, now. I've got a problem; as I related to you on the phone, I have a girl now who -- '

'All right.'

'P-pardon?'

Maury Frauenzimmer sighed. 'I said *all right;* I'll keep you on a little longer. So it hastens the bankruptcy of Frauenzimmer Associates. So what. He shrugged massively.

'So ist das Leben: that's life.'

One of the two children simulacra said to the adult male, 'Isn't he a good man, Daddy?'

'Yes, Tommy,' the adult male answered, nodding. 'He most certainly is.' It patted the boy on the shoulder. The whole family beamed.

'I'll keep you on until next Wednesday,' Maury decided. 'That's the best I can do, but maybe it'll help a little. After that -- I just don't know. I can't foresee anything. Even though I am slightly precognitive, as I've always said. I mean to a certain extent I've generally had valid hunches as to the future. Not in this case, though, not one damn bit. The entire thing is a mass of confusion, as far as I'm concerned.'

Chic said, 'Thanks, Maury.'

Grunting, Maury Frauenzimmer resumed reading the morning paper.

'Maybe by next Wednesday something good'll come along,' Chic said. 'Something we don't expect.' Maybe, as sales manager, I can bring in a huge order, he thought.

'Say, maybe so,' Maury said. He did not sound very convinced.

'I'm really going to try,' Chic said.

'Sure,' Maury agreed. 'You try, Chic, you do that.' His voice was low, muffled by resignation.

6

To Richard Kongrosian the McPhearson Act was a calamity because in a single instant it erased his great support in life, Dr Egon Superb. He was left at the mercy of his lifelong illness-process, which, right at the moment, had assumed enormous power over him. This was why he had left Jenner and voluntarily checked in at Franklin Aimes Neuropsychiatric Hospital in San Francisco, a place deeply familiar to him; he had, during the past decade, checked in there many times.

However, this time he probably would not be able to leave. This time his illness-process had advanced too far.

He was, he knew, an anankastic, a person for whom reality had shrunk to the dimension of compulsion; everything he did was forced on him -- there was for him nothing voluntary, spontaneous or free. And, to make matters worse, he had tangled with a Nitz commercial. In fact, he still had the commercial with him; he carried it about with him in his pocket.

Getting it out now, Kongrosian started the Theodorus Nitz commercial up, listening once more to its evil message.

The commercial squeaked. ‘At any moment one may offend others, *any hour of the day!'*

And in his mind appeared the full-colour image of a scene unfolding; a good-looking black-haired man leaning towards a blonde, full-breasted girl in a bathing suit in order to kiss her. On the girl's face the expression of rapture and submission all at once vanished, was replaced by repugnance. And the commercial shrilled, ‘He was not fully safe from offensive body odour! You see?'

That's me, Kongrosian said to himself. I smell bad. He had, due to the commercial, acquired a phobic body odour; he had been contaminated through the commercial, and there was no way to rid himself of the odour; he had for weeks now tried a thousand rituals of rinsing and washing, to no avail.

That was the trouble with phobic odours; once acquired they stayed, even advanced in their dreadful power. At this moment he did not dare get close to any other human being; he had to remain ten feet away so that they would not become aware of the odour. No full-breasted blonde girls for him.

And at the same time he knew that the odour was a delusion, that it did not really exist; it was an obsessive idea only. However, that realization did not help him. He still could not bear to come within ten feet of another human being -- of any sort whatsoever. Full-breasted or not.

For instance, at this very moment Janet Raimer, chief talent scout from the White House, was searching for him. If she found him, even here in his private room at Franklin Aimes, she would insist on seeing him, would force her way close to him -- and then the world would, for him, collapse.

He liked Janet, who was middle-aged, had a waggish sense of humour and was cheerful. How could he bear to have Janet detect the terrible body odour which the commercial had passed on to him? It was an impossible situation, and Kongrosian sat hunched over at the table in the corner of the room, clenching and unclenching his fists, trying to think what to do.

Perhaps he could call her on the phone. But the odour, he believed, could be transmitted along the phone wires; she would detect it anyhow. So that was no good. Maybe a telegram? No, the odour would move from him to that, too, and from it to Janet.

In fact, his phobic body odour could contaminate the entire world. Such was at least theoretically possible.

But he had to have *some* contact with people; for instance, very soon now he wanted to call his son Plautus Kongrosian at their home in Jenner. No matter how hard one tried one could not entirely suspend inter-personal relationships, desirable as it might be.

Perhaps A.G. Chemie can help me, he conjectured. They might have a new ultra-powerful synthetic detergent which will obliterate my phobic body odour, at least for a time.

Who do I know there that I can contact? He tried to recall.

On the Houston, Texas, Symphony Board of Directors there was ...

The telephone in his room rang.

Carefully, Kongrosian draped a handtowel over the screen. ‘Hell,' he said, standing a good distance from the phone, hoping thereby not to contaminate it. Naturally, it was a vain hope, but he had to make the attempt; he was still trying.

‘The White House in Washington, D.C.,' a voice from the phone stated. ‘Janet Raimer calling. Go ahead, Miss Raimer. I have Mr Kongrosian's room.'

‘Hello, Richard,' Janet Raimer said. ‘What have you put over the phone screen?'

Pressed against the far wall, with as much distance between himself and the phone as possible, Kongrosian said, ‘You shouldn't have tried to reach me, Janet. You know how ill I am. I'm in an advanced compulsive-obsessive state, the worst I've ever experienced. I seriously doubt if I'll ever be playing publicly again. There's just too much risk. For instance, I suppose you saw the item in the newspaper today about the workman in the candy factory who fell into the vat of hardening chocolate. I did that.'

‘You did? How?'

‘Psionicly. Entirely involuntarily, of course. Currently, I'm responsible for all the psychomotor accidents taking place in the world -- that's why I've signed myself in here at the hospital for a course of electroconvulsive shock. I believe in it, despite the fact that it's gone out of style. Personally I get nothing from drugs. When you smell as bad as I do, Janet, no drugs are going to -- ‘

Janet Raimer interrupted. ‘I don't believe you really smell as badly as you imagine, Richard. I've known you for many years and I can't imagine you smelling really genuinely badly, at least enough to force a termination of your brilliant career.'

‘Thanks for your loyalty,' Kongrosian said gloomily, ‘but you just don't understand. This is no ordinary physical odour. This is an idea type odour. Some day I'll mail you a text on the subject, perhaps by Bingswanger or some of the other existential psychologists. They really understood me and my problem, even though they lived a hundred years ago. Obviously they were precogs. The tragedy is that although Minkowski, Kuhn, and Binswanger understood me, there's nothing they can do to help me.'

Janet said, ‘The First Lady is looking forward to your quick and happy recovery.'

The inanity of her remark infuriated him. ‘Good grief don't you understand Janet? At this point I'm thoroughly delusional. I'm as mentally ill as it's possible to be. It's incredible that I can communicate with you at all. It's a credit to my ego-strength that I'm not at this point totally autistic.

Anyone else in my situation would be.' He felt momentary, justified pride. ‘It's an interesting situation that I'm facing, this phobic body odour. Obviously, it's a reaction-formation to a more serious disorder, one which would disintegrate my comprehension of the Umwelt, Mitwelt and Eigenwelt. What I've managed to do is -- ‘

‘Richard,' Janet Raimer interrupted, ‘I feel so sorry for you. I wish I could help you.' She sounded, then, as if she were about to cry; her voice wavered.

‘Oh well,' Kongrosian said, ‘who needs the Umwelt, Mitwelt and Eigenwelt? Take it easy, Janet. Don't get so emotionally involved. I'll be out of here, just as before.' But he did not really believe that. This time was different. And evidently Janet had sensed it. ‘However,' he went on, ‘I think in the meantime you're going to have to search elsewhere for White House talent. You'll have to forget me and strike out into entirely new areas. What else is a talent scout for, if not to do exactly that?'

‘I suppose so,' Janet said.

My son, Kongrosian thought. Maybe he could appear in my place.

What a weird, morbid thought that was; he cringed from it, horrified that he had let it enter his mind.

Really, it demonstrated how ill he was. As if anyone could be interested, take seriously, the unfortunate quasi-musical noises which Plautus made ... although perhaps in the largest, most embracing sense, they could be called *ethnic*.

'Your current disappearance from the world,' Janet Raimer said, 'is a tragedy. As you say, it's my job to find someone or something to fill the void -- even though I know that's impossible. I'll make the try. Thank you, Richard. It was nice of you to talk to me, considering your condition.

I'll right off now, and let you rest.'

Kongrosian said, 'All I hope is that I haven't contaminated you with my phobic odour.' He broke the connection, then.

My last tie with the interpersonal world, he realized. I may never speak on the phone again; I feel my world contracting even more. God, where will it end? But the electroconvulsive shock will help; the shrinkage process will be reversed or at least stalled.

I wonder if I ought to try to get hold of Egon Superb, he said to himself. Despite the McPhearson Act. Hopeless; Superb no longer exists -- the law has obliterated him, at least as far as his patients are concerned. Egon Superb may still exist as an individual, in essence, but the category 'psychoanalyst' has been eradicated as if it never existed.

But how I need him! If I could consult him just one more time -- damn A.G. Chemie and their enormous lobby, their huge influence. Maybe I can get my phobic odour to spread to them.

Yes, I'll put through a call to them, he decided. Ask about the possibility of the super detergent and at the same time contaminate them; they deserve it.

In the phone book he looked up the number of the Bay Area branch of A.G. Chemie, found it, and by psychokinesis dialled.

They'll be sorry they forced passage of that act, Kongrosian said to himself as he listened to the phone connection being put through.

'Let me talk to your chief psych-chemist,' he said, when the A.G. Chemie switchboard had responded.

Presently a busy-sounding male voice came on to the line, the towel placed over the screen of the phone made it impossible for Kongrosian to see the man but he sounded young, competent, and thoroughly professional. 'This is B Station. Merrill Judd speaking. Who is this and why do you have the vid portion blocked?' The psych-chemist sounded irritable.

Kongrosian said, 'You don't know me, Mr Judd.' And then he thought, *Now it's time to contaminate them.*

Stepping close to the phone he whisked the towel from the screen.

'Richard Kongrosian,' the psych-chemist said, eyeing him. 'Yes, I know you, know your artistry at least.' He was a young man, with a competent no-nonsense expression, a thoroughly detached schizoid person indeed. 'It's an honour to meet you sir. What can I do for you?'

'I need an antidote,' Kongrosian said, 'for an abominable Theodorus Nitz offensive body odour commercial. You know the one which begins: "In moments of great intimacy with ones we love, especially *then* does the danger of offending become acute," and so forth.' He hated even to think about it; his body odour seemed to become more powerful when he did so, if such was possible. He longed, then, for genuine human contact; he felt violently conscious of his encapsulation. 'Do I scare you?' he asked.

Regarding him with his wise, professional intensity, the A.G. Chemie official said, 'I'm not worried. Naturally I've heard discussions of your endogenous psychosomatic ailment, Mr Kongrosian.'

'Well,' Kongrosian said tightly, 'let me tell you that it's exogenous; it's the Nitz commercial that started it.' It depressed him to realize that strangers, that the entire world was aware of -- was talking about -- his psychological situation.

'The predisposition must have been there,' Judd said, 'for the Nitz commercial to so influence you.'

'On the contrary,' Kongrosian said. 'And as a matter of fact I'm going to sue the Nitz Agency, sue them for millions -- I'm totally prepared to start litigation. But that's beside the point right now. What can you do, Judd? You smell it by now, don't you? Admit you do, and then we can explore the possibilities of therapy. I've been seeing a psychoanalyst, Dr Egon Superb, but thanks to your cartel that's over, now.'

'Hmm,' Judd said.

'Is that the best you can do? Listen, it's impossible for me to leave this hospital room. The initiative has got to come from you. I'm appealing to you. My situation is desperate. If it worsens -- '

'An intriguing request,' Judd said. 'I'll have to ponder for a while. I can't answer you immediately, Mr Kongrosian. How long ago did this contamination by the Nitz commercial take place?'

'Approximately one month ago.'

'And before that?'

'Vague phobias. Anxieties. Depression, mostly. I've had ideas of reference, too, but so far I've managed to abort them. Obviously, I'm struggling against an insidious schizophrenic process that's gradually eroding my faculties, blunting their acuity.' He felt glum.

'Perhaps I'll drop over to the hospital.'

‘Ah,' Kongrosian said, pleased. That way I can be certain of contaminating you, he said to himself. And you, in turn, will carry the contamination back to your company, to the entire malign cartel which is responsible for shutting down Dr Superb's practice. ‘Please do,' he said aloud. ‘I'd very much like to consult you tête-à-tête. The sooner the better. But I warn you: I won't be responsible for the outcome. The risk is entirely yours.'

‘Risk? I'll take the risk. What about this afternoon? I have a free hour. Tell me which neuropsychiatric hospital you're in, and if it's local -- ‘ Judd searched for a pen and tablet of paper.

They made good time to Tenner. Late in the afternoon they set down at the ‘copter field on the outskirts of the town; there was plenty of time to make the drive by road to Kongrosian's home in the surrounding hills.

‘You mean,' Molly said, ‘we can't land at his place? We have to -- ‘

‘We hire a cab,' Nat Flieger said. ‘You know.'

‘I know,' Molly said. ‘I've read about them. And it's always a local rustic who acquaints you with the local gossip, all of which can be put in a gnat's eye.' She closed her book and rose to her feet. ‘Well, Nat, maybe you can find out from the cab driver what you want to know. About Kongrosian's secret basement of horrors.'

Jim Planck said huskily, ‘Miss Dondoldo -- ‘ He grimaced. ‘I think a lot of Leo but honest to god -- ‘

‘You can't stand me?' she inquired, raising her eyebrows.

‘Why, I wonder why, Mr Planck.'

‘Cut it out,' Nat said as he lugged his gear from the ‘copter and set it down on the damp ground. The air smelled of rain; it was heavy and clinging and he instinctively rebelled against it, against the innate *unhealthiness* of it. ‘This must be grand for asthmatics,' he said, looking around. Kongrosian, of course, would not meet them; it was their job entirely to find his place -- and him. They would be lucky, in fact, if he received them at all; Nat was well aware of that.

Stepping gingerly from the ‘copter (she was wearing sandals) Molly said, ‘It smells funny.' She took a deep breath, her bright cotton blouse swelling. ‘Ugh. Like rotting vegetation.'

‘That's what it is,' Nat said as he helped Jim Planck with his gear.

‘Thanks,' Planck murmured. ‘I believe I got it, Nat. How long are we going to be up here?' He looked as if he wanted to re-enter the ‘copter and start right back; Nat saw on the man's face overt panic. ‘This area,' Planck said, ‘always makes me think of -- like in the kids' book about the three billygoats gruff. You know.' His voice grated. ‘Trolls.'

Molly stared at him and then sharply laughed.

A cab rolled up to greet them, but it was not driven by a local

rustic; it was a twenty-year-old autonomic, with a mute self-guidance system. Presently they had their recording and personal equipment aboard and the auto-cab was rolling from the field, on its way to Richard Kongrosian's home, the address in the instruction-well of the cab acting as the tropism.

'I wonder,' Molly said, watching the old-fashioned houses and stores of the town pass by, 'what they do for entertainment up here?'

Nat said, 'Maybe they come down to the 'copter field and watch the outsiders who occasionally wander in.' Like us, he thought, seeing people along the sidewalk here and there glance up curiously.

We're the entertainment, he decided. There certainly did not appear to be much else; the town looked as it must have before the fracas of 1980; the stores had tinted glass and plastic fronts, now chipped and in disrepair beyond belief.

And, by a huge, abandoned, obsolete supermarket, he saw an empty parking lot: space for surface vehicles which no longer existed.

For a man of ability to live here, Nat decided, it must be a form of suicide. It could only be a subtle self-destructiveness that would cause Kongrosian to leave the vast and busy urban complex of Warsaw, one of the brightest centres of human activity and communication in the world, and come to this dismal, rain-drenched, decaying town. Or -- a form of penance. Could that be it? To punish himself for god knew what, perhaps something to do with his special-birth son ... assuming that what Molly said was correct.

He thought about Jim Planck's joke, the one about the psychokineticist Richard Kongrosian being in a pubtrans accident and growing hands. But Kongrosian *had* hands; he simply did not need to employ them in his music. Without them he would obtain more nuances of tonal colouring, more precise rhythms and phrasing. The entire somatic component was bypassed; the mind of the artist applied itself directly to the keyboard.

Do these people along these deteriorating streets know who lives among them? Nat wondered. Probably not. Probably Kongrosian keeps to himself, lives with his family and ignores the community. A recluse, and who wouldn't be, up here? And if they did know about Kongrosian they would be suspicious of him, because he was an artist and because he was also a Psi; it was a double burden to bear. No doubt in his concourse with these people -- when he bought at the local grocery store -- he eliminated his psychokinetic faculty and used his manual extremities like everyone else. Unless Kongrosian had even more courage than Nat realized ...

'When I get to be a world famous artist,' Jim Planck said, 'The first thing I'm going to do is move to a backwater boondock like this.' His voice was laden with sarcasm. 'It'll be my reward.'

‘Yes,' Nat said, ‘it must be nice to be able to cash in on one's talent.' He spoke absently; ahead he saw a throng of people and his attention had turned that way. Banners and marchers in uniform ... he was seeing, he realized, a demonstration by political extremists, the so-called Sons of Job, neo-Nazis who seemed to have sprung up everywhere, of late, even here in this god-forsaken town in California.

And yet wasn't this actually the most likely place for the Sons of Job to show themselves? This decadent region reeked of defeat; here lived those who had failed, *Bes* who held no real role in the system. The Sons of Job, like the Nazis of the past, fed on disappointment, on the disinherited. Yet these backwater towns which time had bypassed were the movement's authentic feeding-ground ... it should not have surprised him, then, to see this.

But these were not Germans; these were Americans.

It was a sobering thought. Because he could not dismiss the Sons of Job as a symptom of the ceaseless, unchanging derangement of the German mentality, that was too pat, too simple. These were his own people marching here today, his countrymen. It could have been him, too; if he were to lose his job with EME or suffer some crushing, humiliating social experience …

‘Look at them,' Molly said.

‘I am looking,' Nat answered.

‘And you're thinking, "It could be me." Right? Frankly I doubt if you have the guts to march in public in support of your convictions; in fact I doubt if you have any convictions. Look. There's Goltz.'

She was correct. Bertold Goltz, the Leader, was present here today. How oddly the man came and went; it was never possible to predict where and when he might pop up.

Perhaps Goltz had the use of von Lessinger's principle.

The use of time travel.

That would give Goltz, Nat reflected, a certain advantage over all the charismatic leaders of the past, in that it would make him more or less eternal. He could not in the customary fashion be killed. This would explain why the government had not crushed the movement; he had wondered about that, why Nicole tolerated it. She tolerated it because she had to.

Technically, Goltz could be murdered, but an earlier Goltz would simply move into the future and replace him; Goltz would go on, not ageing or changing, and the movement would ultimately benefit because they would have a leader who could be counted on not to go the way of Adolf Hitler: who would not develop paresis or any other degenerative disease.

Jim Planck, absorbed in the sight, murmured, ‘Handsome son-of-a-gun, isn't he?' He, too, seemed impressed. The man could have a

career in the movies or TV, Nat reflected. Been that sort of entertainer, rather than the kind he was. Goltz had style. Tall, clouded-over in a sort of tense gloom ... and yet, Nat noticed, just a trifle too heavy. Goltz appeared to be in his mid-forties and the leanness, the masculinity of youth, had abandoned him. As he marched he sweated. What a *physical* quality the man had; there was nothing ghostly or ethereal about him, no spirituality to offset the stubborn beef.

The marchers turned, came head-on towards their autocab.

The cab halted.

Molly said caustically, 'He even commands the obedience of machines. At least the local ones.' She laughed briefly, uneasily.

'We'd better get out of the way,' Jim Planck said, 'or they're going to be swarming over us like Martian column ants.' He fiddled with the controls of the auto-cab. 'Damn this worn-out contraption: it's dead as a doornail.'

'Killed by awe,' Molly said.

The first line of marchers contained Goltz, who strode along in the centre, transporting a flowing, multi-coloured cloth banner. Seeing them, Goltz yelled something. Nat could not catch it.

'He's telling us to get out of the way,' Molly said. 'Maybe we'd better forget about recording Kongrosian and step out and join him. Sign up for the movement. What do you say, Nat? Here's your chance. You can rightfully say you were forced to.' She opened the door of the cab and hopped lightly out on to the sidewalk. 'I'm not giving up my life because of a stalled circuit in an auto-cab twenty years out of date.'

'Hail, mighty leader,' Jim Planck said shortly, and also hopped out to join Molly on the sidewalk, out of the path of the marchers, who were now, as a body, shouting angrily and gesturing.

Nat said, 'I'm staying here.' He remained where he was surrounded by the recording equipment, his hand reflexively resting on his precious Ampek F-a2; he did not intend to abandon it, even to Bertold Goltz.

Coming rapidly down the street, Goltz all at once grinned.

It was a sympathetic grin, as if Goltz, despite the seriousness of his political intentions, had room left in his heart for a trace of empathy.

'You got troubles, too?' Goltz called to Nat. Now the first rank of marchers -- including the Leader -- had reached the old, stalled auto-cab; the rank divided and dribbled past, raggedly, on both sides. Goltz, however, halted. He brought out a rumpled red handkerchief and mopped the shiny, steaming flesh of his neck and brow.

'Sorry I'm in your way,' Nat said.

'Heck,' Goltz said, 'I was expecting you.' He glanced up, his dark,

intelligent, luminous eyes alert. ‘Nat Flieger, head of Artists and Repertoire for Electronic Musical Enterprise of Tijuana. Up here in this land of ferns and frogs to record Richard Kongrosian ... *because you don't happen to know that Kongrosian isn't home.* He's at Franklin Aimes Neuropsychiatric Hospital in San Francisco.'

‘Christ,' Nat said, taken aback.

‘Why not record me instead?' Goltz said. Amiably.

‘Doing what?'

‘Oh, I can shout or rant a few historic slogans for you. Half an hour's worth or so ... enough to fill up a small record. It may not sell well today or tomorrow, but one of these days -- ‘ Goltz winked at Nat.

‘No thanks,' Nat said.

‘Is your Ganymedean creature too pure for what I have to say?' The smile was empty of warmth, now; it was fixed starkly in place.

Nat said, ‘I'm a Jew, Mr Goltz. So it's hard for me to look on neo-Nazism with much enthusiasm.'

After a pause Goltz said, ‘I'm a Jew, too, Mr Flieger. Or more properly, an Israeli. Look it up. It's in the records. Any good newspaper or media news morgue can tell you that.'

Nat stared at him.

‘Our enemy, yours and mine,' Goltz said, ‘is the der Alte system. They're the real inheritors of the Nazi past. Think about that. They, and the cartels. A.G. Chemie, Karp und Sohnen Werke ... didn't you know that? Where have you been, Flieger? Haven't you been listening?'

After an interval Nat said, ‘I've been listening. But I haven't been very much convinced.'

‘I'll tell you something, then,' Goltz said. ‘Nicole and the people around her, our *Mutter,* is going to make use of von Lessinger's time travel principle to make contact with the Third Reich, with Hermann Goering, as a matter of fact. They'll be doing it soon. Does this surprise you?'

‘I've -- heard rumours.' Nat shrugged.

‘You're not a *Ge,'* Goltz said. ‘You're like me, Flieger, me and my people. You're forever on the outside. We're not even supposed to hear rumours. There shouldn't have been a leak. But we *Bes* are not going to talk -- do you agree! Bringing Fat Hermann from the past into our time is just too much, wouldn't you say?' He studied Nat's face, waiting for his reaction.

Presently Nat said, ‘If it's true -- ‘

‘It's true, Flieger.' Goltz nodded.

‘Then it puts your movement in a new light.'

‘Come and see me,' Goltz said. ‘When the news is made public. When you know it's true. Okay?'

Nat said nothing. He did not meet the man's dark intense gaze.

'So long, Flieger.' Goltz said. And picking up his banner, which had been resting against the auto-cab, he strode on down the street to rejoin his marching followers.

7

Seated together in the business office of The Abraham Lincoln, Don Tishman and Patrick Doyle studied the application which Mr Ian Duncan of number 304 had just now filed with them. Ian Duncan desired to appear in the twiceweekly building talent show, and at a time when a White House talent scout was present.

The request, Tishman saw, was routine. Except that Ian Duncan proposed to perform his act in conjunction with another individual *who did not live at The Abraham Lincoln.*

Pondering, Doyle said, 'It's an old buddy of his from the Military Service. He told me once; the two of them used to have this act years ago. Baroque music on two jugs. A novelty.'

'What apartment house does his partner live in?' Tishman inquired. Approval of the application would depend on how relations stood between The Abraham Lincoln and the other building.

'None. He sells jalopies for that -- Loony Luke -- you know. Those cheap little vehicles that just barely manage to get you to Mars. He lives on the lot, I understand. The lots move around; it's a nomadic existence. I'm sure you've heard.'

'Yes,' Tishman agreed, 'and it's totally out of the question. We can't have that act on our stage, not with a man like that involved in it. There's no reason why Ian can't play his jug; I wouldn't be surprised if it's a satisfactory act. But it's against our tradition to have an outsider participate; our stage is for our own people exclusively, always has been, and always will. So there's no need even to discuss this.' He eyed the skypilot critically.

'True,' Doyle said, 'but it's legal for one of us to invite a relative to watch the talent shows ... so why not an army buddy? Why *not* let him participate? This means a lot to Ian: I think you know he's been failing lately. He's not a very intelligent person. Actually, he should be doing a manual job, I suppose. But if he has artistic ability, for instance this job concept -- '

Examining his documents, Tishman saw that the highest White House scout would be attending a show at The Abraham Lincoln, Miss Janet Raimer. The top acts at the building would of course be scheduled that night ... so Duncan & Miller and their baroque jug band would have to compete successfully in order to obtain that privilege, and there were a number of acts which -- Tishman thought were probably superior. After all, *jugs* ... and not even electronic jugs, at that.

'All right,' he decided aloud. 'I agree.'

'You're showing your human side,' Doyle said, with an expression

of sentimentality which disgusted Tishman. ‘And I think we'll all enjoy the Bach and Vivaldi as played by Duncan & Miller on their inimitable jugs.'

Tishman, wincing, nodded.

It was old Joe Purd, the most ancient resident of the building, who informed Vince Strikerock that his wife -- or more exactly his ex-wife -- Julie was living upstairs on the top floor with Chic. Had been all this time.

My own brother, Vince said to himself, incredulous.

The time was late evening, almost eleven o'clock, close to curfew. Never the less, Vince headed at once for an elevator and a moment later was ascending to the top floor of The Abraham Lincoln.

I'll kill him, he decided. Kill both of them, in fact.

And I'll probably get off, he conjectured, before a jury selected at random from among the residents of the building, because after all I'm official identification reader; everybody knows me and respects me. I have their confidence.

And what position does Chic hold, here? And also I work for a really huge cartel, Karp u. Sohnen, whereas Chic works for a flea-sized outfit on the verge of collapse. And everyone here knows that, too. Facts like that are important. You have to weigh them, take them into account. Whether you approve of it or not.

And in addition, the pure unadulterated fact that Vince Strikerock was a *Ge* and Chic was not would alone positively ensure his acquittal.

At the door of Chic's apartment he paused, not knocking but merely standing there in the hall, uncertainly. This is awful, he said to himself. He was actually very fond of his older brother, who had helped raise him. Didn't Chic really mean more to him than even Julie? No. Nothing and no one meant more to him than Julie.

Raising his hand he knocked.

The door opened. There stood Chic, in his blue dressing gown, a magazine in one hand. He looked a little older, more tired and bald and depressed, than usual.

‘Now I realize why you haven't dropped by and tried to cheer me up,' Vince said, ‘during these last couple of days. How could you, with Julie living up here?'

Chic said, ‘Come on in.' He held the door wide. Wearily, he led his brother into the small living room. ‘I suppose you're going to give me a hard time,' he said over his shoulder. ‘As if I didn't have enough already. My goddam firm's about to close down -- ‘

‘Who cares,' Vince said, panting. ‘It's what you deserve.'

He looked around for Julie but did not see her or any sign of her belongings. Could old Joe Purd have been wrong? Impossible. Purd knew everything that went on in the building; gossip was his whole

life. He was an authority.

'I heard something interesting on the news tonight,' Chic said as he seated himself on the couch facing his younger brother. 'The government has decided to allow an exception in the application of the McPhearson Act. A psychoanalyst named Egon -- '

'Listen,' Vince broke in. 'Where is she?'

'I've got troubles enough without you jumping on me.'

Chic eyed his younger brother. 'I'll flip you for her.'

Vince Strikerock choked with rage.

'A joke,' Chic murmured woodenly. 'Sorry I said it; don't know why I said it. She's out somewhere buying clothes. She's expensive to keep, isn't she? You should have warned me. Put up a notice on the building's bulletin board. But I'll tell you seriously what I propose. I want you to get me into Karp und Sohnen Werke. Ever since Julie showed up here I've been thinking about this. Call it a deal.'

'No deal.'

'Then no Julie.'

Vince said, 'What kind of job do you want with Karp?'

'Anything. Well, anything in public relations, sales or promotion; not in the engineering or manufacturing end. The same type of work I've been doing for Maury Frauenzimmer. Clean hands type of work.'

His voice shaking, Vince said, 'I'll get you in as assistant shipping clerk.'

Chic laughed sharply. 'That's a good one. And I'll give you back Julie's left foot.'

'Jesus.' Vince stared at him, unable to believe his ears. 'You're depraved or something.'

'Not at all. I'm in a very bad position, careerwise. All I have to bargain with is your ex-wife. What am I supposed to do? Sink obligingly into oblivion? The hell with that; I'm fighting to exist.' Chic seemed calm, fully rational.

'Do you love her?' Vince said.

Now, for the first time, his brother's composure seemed to leave him. 'What? Oh sure, I'm out of my mind with love for her -- can't you perceive that? How can you ask?' His tone was violently bitter. 'That's why I'm going to trade her back to you for a job at Karp. Listen Vince, she's a cold, hostile cookie -- she's out for herself and no one else. As far as I can ascertain she came up here merely to hurt you. Ponder that. I tell you what. We've got a bad problem here, you and I, with Julie; it's ruining our lives. You agree? I think we should take it to an expert. Frankly it's too much for me. I can't solve it.'

'What expert?'

'Any expert. For instance the building marital guidance counsellor. Or let's take it to the last remaining psychoanalyst in the

USEA, that Dr Egon Superb they told about on the TV. Let's go to him before they shut him down, too. What do you say? You know I'm right; you and I'll never manage to thrash this out.' He added. 'And come out alive, anyhow the two of us.'

'You go.'

'Okay.' Chic nodded. 'I'll go. But you agree to abide by his decision. Okay?'

'Hell,' Vince said. 'Then I'll go along, too. You think I'm going to depend on your verbal report of what he says?'

The door of the apartment opened. Vince turned. There in the doorway stood Julie, with a package under her arm.

'Come back later,' Chic said to her. 'Please.' He rose to his feet and walked towards her.

'We're going to see a psychiatrist about you,' Vince said to Julie. 'It's settled.' To his brother he said, 'You and I'll split the fees. I'm not going to get stuck with the whole tab.'

'Agreed,' Chic said, nodding. Awkwardly -- or so it seemed to Vince -- he kissed Julie on the cheek, patted her shoulder. To Vince he said, 'And I still want that Job at Karp und Sohnen Werke, no matter how this comes out, no matter which of us gets her. You understand?'

Vince said, 'I'll see what I can do.' He spoke grudgingly, with massive resentment. It seemed to him too much to ask.

But after all, Chic was his brother. There was such a thing as *family*.

Picking up the telephone, Chic said, 'I'll call Dr Superb right now.'

'At this time of night?' Julie said.

'Tomorrow, then. Early.' With reluctance Chic set the phone down again. 'I'm anxious to get started; this whole business weighs on my mind, and I've got other problems that are more important.' He glanced at Julie. 'No offence meant.'

Stiffly, Julie said, 'I haven't agreed to go to a psychiatrist or abide by anything he says. If I want to stay with you -- '

'We'll do what Superb says,' Chic informed her. 'And if he says for you to go back downstairs and you don't then I'll get a court order to bar you from my apartment. I mean it.' Vince had never heard his brother sound so hard; it surprised him. Probably it was due to Frauenzimmer Associates folding up. Chic's job was his whole life, after all.

'A drink,' Chic said. And crossed to the liquor cabinet in the kitchen.

To her talent scout, Janet Raimer, Nicole said, 'Where did you manage to dig up *that?'*

She gestured towards the folk singers twanging their electric guitars and nasally intoning away at the microphone in the centre of

the Camellia Room of the White House. ‘They're really awful.' She felt thoroughly unhappy.

Businesslike and detached, Janet answered brightly, ‘From the conapt building Oak Farms in Cleveland, Ohio.'

‘Well, send them back,' Nicole said, and signalled Maxwell Jamison who sat, bulky and inert, on the far side of the large room. Jamison at once clambered to his feet, stretched, and made his way to the folk singers and their microphone.

They glanced at him. Apprehension showed on their faces and their droning song began to trail off.

‘I don't want to hurt your feelings,' Nicole said to them, ‘but I guess I've had enough of ethnic music for this evening. Sorry.' She gave them one of her radiant smiles; wanly they smiled back. They were finished. And they knew it.

Back to Oak Farm Conapts, Nicole said to herself. Where you belong.

A uniformed White House page approached her chair.

‘Mrs Thibodeaux,' the page whispered. ‘Assistant State Secretary Garth McRae is now waiting in the Easter Lily Alcove for you. He says you're expecting him.'

‘Oh yes,' Nicole said. ‘Thank you. Give him some coffee or a drink and tell him I'll be in shortly.'

The page departed.

‘Janet,' Nicole said, ‘I want you to play back that tape you made of your phone conversation with Kongrosian. I want to see for myself just how sick he is; with hypochondriacs you can never be certain.'

‘You understand there's no vid portion,' Janet said. ‘Kongrosian had a towel -- ‘

‘Yes, I realize that.' Nicole felt irritable. ‘But I know him well enough to tell by his voice alone. He gets that reticent, introverted quality when he's genuinely in distress. If he's just feeling sorry for himself he becomes garrulous.' She stood up, and at once the guests stood, too, here and there in their places throughout the Camellia Room. There were not many of them tonight; the hour was late, almost midnight, and the current programme of artistic talent was slender.

This was distinctly not one of the better evenings.

‘I'll tell you what,' Janet Raimer said archily. ‘If I can't do better than this, than the Moonrakers -- ‘ She gestured at the folk singers, who now were glumly packing up their instruments. ‘I'll arrange a programme entirely of the best of Ted Nitz' commercials.' She smiled, showing her stainless steel teeth. Nicole winced. Janet, sometimes, was just too much the witty professional woman. Just too amusing and poised, and wholly identified with this powerful office; Janet

could be sure of herself any time and this bothered Nicole. There was no way to get at Janet Raimer.

No wonder every aspect of life had become for Janet a kind of game.

On the raised dais, a new group had replaced the defunct folk singers. Nicole examined her programme. This was the Las Vegas Modern String Quartet; they would in a moment, be playing a Haydn work, despite their august title. Maybe I'll go see Garth now, Nicole decided. Haydn seemed to her, with all the problems she had to cope with, a bit too nice. A bit too ornamental, not substantial enough.

When we get Goering here, she thought, we can bring in a brass band, street style, to play Bavarian military marches. I must remember to tell Janet that, she told herself. Or we could have some Wagner. Didn't the Nazis dote on Wagner? Yes, she was sure of that. She had been studying history books about the period of the Third Reich; Dr Goebbels, in his diaries, had mentioned the reverence felt by high Nazi officials at a performance of *The Ring.*

Or perhaps it was *Meistersinger.*

We could have the brass band play arrangements of themes from *Parsifal,* she decided with a secret spasm of amusement. In march tempo, of course. A sort of proctological version, just right for the Ubermenschen of the Third Reich.

Within twenty-four hours the von Lessinger technicians would have the conduits to 1944 completed. It was weird but perhaps by tomorrow at this time Hermann Goering would be here in this era, plucked from his own time period by the most wily of the White House negotiators, skinny, small, elder Major Tucker Behrans. Practically a der Alte himself, except that Army Major Behrans was alive and genuine and breathing, not a mere simulacrum. At least not as far as she knew. Although sometimes it seemed that way, seemed to her that she existed in the centre of a milieu comprised entirely of artificial creations of the cartel system, of A.G. Chemie conspiring with Karp u. Sohnen Werke in particular. Their commitment to ersatz reality ... it was frankly too much for her. She had, over the years of contact with it, developed a sense of pure dread.

'I have an appointment,' she said to Janet. 'Excuse me,' she rose, left the Camellia Room; two NP men fell in behind her as she made her way down the corridor to the Easter Lily Alcove where Garth McRae waited.

In the alcove Garth sat with another man whom she recognized -- by his uniform -- as a top official of the higher police. She did not know him. Evidently he had arrived with Garth; the two of them were consulting in low tones, unaware of her arrival.

'Have you informed Karp und Sohnen?' she asked Garth.

At once both men were on their feet, respectful and attentive. ‘Oh yes, Mrs Thibodeaux,' Garth answered. ‘At least,' he added quickly, ‘I informed Anton Karp that the Rudi Kalbfleisch simulacrum is going to be discontinued soon. I -- haven't informed them that the next simulacrum will be obtained through other channels.'

‘Why not?' Nicole asked.

Glancing at his companion, Garth said, ‘Mrs Thibodeaux, this man is Wilder Pembroke, new Commissioner of the NP. He's warned me that Karp und Sohnen have held a closed, secret meeting of their top executive personnel and have discussed the possibility that the contract for the next der Alte will be let somewhere else.' Garth explained, ‘The NP of course has a number of individuals employed at Karp -- needless to say.'

Nicole said to the police official, ‘What will Karp do?'

‘The Werke will make public the fact that the der Altes are constructs, that the last living der Alte held office fifty years ago.' Pembroke cleared his throat noisily: he appeared singularly ill at ease. ‘This is a clear violation of basic law, of course. Such knowledge constitutes a state secret and cannot be brought before the *Bes.* Both Anton Karp and his father Felix Karp are perfectly aware of that; they discussed these legal aspects at their conference. They know that they -- and anyone else at policy level at the Werke -- would be instantly liable to prosecution.'

‘And yet they'd go ahead,' Nicole said, and thought to herself, So we're correct; *the Karp people are already too strong.* Already possess far too much autonomy. And they won't abandon this without a fight.'

‘Individuals high in cartel circles are peculiarly stiffnecked,' Pembroke said. ‘The last of the true Prussians, perhaps. The Attorney General has asked that you contact him before going ahead in this matter; he will be glad to outline the direction of the state's litigation against the Werke, and he's anxious to discuss several sensitive aspects with you. By and large, however, the Attorney General is prepared to move in at any time. As soon as he receives notification. However -- ‘ Pembroke glanced at her sideways.

‘I wonder. It's the summation of all data reaching me that the cartel system as a whole is simply too enormous, too sturdily constructed and interlocked, to be brought down. That, instead of direct action against it, some sort of quid pro quo should be brought about. Such appears to me to be much more desirable. And feasible.'

Nicole said, ‘But that's up to me.'

Both Garth McRae and Pembroke nodded in unison.

‘I will discuss this with Maxwell Jamison,' she said finally.

‘Max will have a relatively clear idea as to how this information about the der Alte will be received by the *Bes,* by the uniformed

public. I have no idea how they would react. Would they riot? Would they find it amusing? Personally I find it amusing. I'm sure it would appear that way to me if I were, say, a rather minor employee of some cartel or government agency. Do you agree?'

Neither man smiled; both remained tense and sombre.

'In my opinion, if I may say so,' Pembroke said, 'release of this information will topple the entire structure of our society.'

'But it *is* amusing,' Nicole persisted. 'Isn't it? Rudi is a dummy, an ersatz creation of the cartel system, and yet he's the highest elected official in the USEA. These people voted for him and for the der Alte before him and so on back for fifty years -- I'm sorry, but it has to be funny; there's no other way to look at it.' She was laughing now; the idea of not knowing this Geheimnis, this state secret and suddenly finding it out, was too much for her. 'I think I'll go ahead,' she told Garth. 'Yes, I've made up my mind; contact the Karp Werke tomorrow morning. Talk directly with both Anton and Felix. Tell them, among other things, that we will arrest them instantly if they try to betray us to the *Bes.* Tell them that the NP is ready to move on them.'

'Yes, Mrs Thibodeaux,' Garth said, with gloom.

'And don't take it so hard,' Nicole said. 'If the Karps do go ahead and release the Geheimnis, we'll still survive -- I think you're wrong: it won't mean the end of our status quo at all.'

Garth said, 'Mrs Thibodeaux, if the Karps release this information, no matter how the *Bes* react, *there can never be another der Alte.* And legally speaking, you hold your position of authority only because you're the wife. It's hard to keep that in mind, because -- ' Garth hesitated.

'Say it,' Nicole said.

'Because it's clear to everyone, *Bes* and *Ges* alike, that you are the ultimate authority in the establishment. And it's essential to maintain the myth that somehow, indirectly at least, you were placed here by the people, by mass public vote.'

There was silence.

Pembroke said finally, 'Perhaps the NP should move in on the Karps *before* they can put out their white paper. Thereby we'd cut them off from the organs of communication.'

'Even under arrest,' Nicole said, 'the Karps would manage to gain access to at least one of the media. Better face that fact.'

'But their reputation, if they're under arrest -- '

'The only solution,' Nicole said thoughtfully, half to herself, 'would be to assassinate those officers of the Werke who attended the policy meeting. In other words, all the *Ges* of the cartel, no matter how many there are. Even if the numbers ran up into the hundreds.' In other words, she said to herself, a purge. Such as one generally only

witnessed in times of revolution.

She shrank from the idea.

'Nacht und Nebel,'

Pembroke murmured.

'What?' Nicole said.

'The Nazi term for the invisible agents of the government who deal in murder.' He faced Nicole calmly. 'Night and fog. They were the Einsatzgruppen. Monsters. Of course our police, the NP has nothing like that. I'm sorry; you'll have to act through the military. Not through us.'

'I was joking,' Nicole said.

Both men studied her.

'There are no more purges,' Nicole said. 'There haven't been any since World War Three. You know that. We're too modern, too civilized, for massacres now.'

Pembroke, frowning, his lips twitching nervously, said, 'Mrs Thibodeaux, when the technicians from the von Lessinger Institute bring Goering to our period, perhaps you can arrange for an Einsatzgruppe to be brought, too. It could assume responsibility vis-à-vis the Karps and then return to the Age of Barbarism.'

She stared at him open-mouthed.

'I'm serious,' Pembroke said, stammering slightly. 'It certainly would be better -- for us at least -- than allowing the Karps to make public the information they possess. That's the worst alternative of all.'

'I agree,' Garth McRae said.

'It's insane,' Nicole said.

Garth McRae said, 'Is it? Through von Lessinger's principle we have access to trained assassins, and, as you pointed out, in our era no such professionals exist. I doubt if it would mean the destruction of scores or hundreds of individuals. I'd guess it could be limited to the board of directors, the executive vice-presidents of the Werke. Possibly as few as eight men.'

'And,' Pembroke pointed out eagerly, 'these eight men, these top officers at Karp, are de facto criminals; they've deliberately met and conspired against the legal government. They're on a par with the Sons of Job. With that Bertold Goltz. Even though they wear black bow ties every evening and drink vintage wine and don't squabble in the gutters and streets.'

'May I say,' Nicole said drily, 'that all of us are de facto criminals. Because this government -- as you pointed out is based on a fraud. And of the most primary magnitude.'

'But it's the *legal* government,' Garth said. 'Fraud or not. And the so-called "fraud" is in the best interests of the people. We're not doing it to exploit anyone -- as the cartel system does. We're not out to

engorge ourselves at somebody else's expense.'

At least, Nicole thought, that's what we tell ourselves.

Pembroke said respectfully, 'Having talked just now to the Attorney General I know how he feels about the rising power of the cartels. Epstein feels they *must* be cut down. It's essential!'

'Perhaps,' Nicole said, 'you have a trifle too much respect for the cartels. I don't. And -- perhaps we should wait a day or so until Hermann Goering is with us and we can ask for an opinion from him.'

Now the two men were staring at her open-mouthed.

'I'm not serious,' she said. *Or was she?* She did not know, herself. 'After all,' she said, 'Goering founded the Gestapo."

'I could never approve of that,' Pembroke said, with hauteur.

'But you don't make policy,' Nicole said to him. 'Technically, Rudi does. That is, I do. I can compel you to act on my behalf in this matter. And you'd do it ... unless, of course, you'd prefer to join the Sons of Job and march up and down the streets throwing rocks and chanting.'

Both Garth McRae and Pembroke looked uneasy. And acutely unhappy.

'Don't be frightened,' Nicole said. 'Do you know what the true basis of political power is? Not guns or troops but the ability to get others to do what you want them to do. By whatever means are appropriate. I know I can get the NP to do what I want -- despite what you personally feel. I can get Hermann Goering to do what I want. It won't be Goering's decision; it'll be mine.'

'I hope,' Pembroke said presently, 'that you're right, that you will be able to handle Goering. I admit that on a strictly subjective level I'm frightened, frightened of this entire experiment with the past. You may open the floodgates. Goering is not a clown.'

'I'm well aware of that,' Nicole said. 'And don't presume to give me advice, Mr Pembroke. It's not your place.'

Pembroke flushed, was silent a moment and then said in a low voice, 'Sorry. Now, if it's all right with you, Mrs Thibodeaux, I'd like to bring up one other matter. It has to do with the sole remaining psychoanalyst now practising in the USEA. Dr Egon Superb. In explanation of the NP's reason for allowing him to -- '

'I don't want to hear about it,' Nicole said. 'I just want you to do your job. As you must know, I never did approve of the McPhearson Act in the first place. So you can hardly expect me to object when it is not fully applied.'

'The patient in question -- '

'Please,' she said sharply.

Pembroke, his face impassive and set, shrugged in obedience.

8

As they started into the auditorium on floor one of The Abraham Lincoln, Ian Duncan saw, trailing along behind Al Miller, the flat, scuttling shape of the Martian creature, the papoola. He stopped short. 'You're bringing that along?'

Al said, 'You don't understand. Don't we have to win?'

After a pause, Ian said, 'Not that way.' He understood all right; the papoola would take on the audience as it had taken on passers-by. It would exert its extrasensory influence on them, coaxing out a favourable decision. So much for the ethics of a jalopy salesman, Ian realized. To Al, this seemed perfectly normal; if they couldn't win by their jug-playing they would win through the papoola.

'Aw,' Al said, gesturing, 'don't be our own worst enemy. All we're engaged in here is a little subliminal sales technique, such as they've been using for a century -- it's an ancient, reputable method of swinging public opinion your away. I mean, let's face it; we haven't played the jug professionally in years.' He touched the controls at his waist and the papoola hurried forward to catch up with them.

Again Al touched the controls. And in Ian's mind a persuasive thought came, *Why not?* Everyone else does it.

With difficulty he said, 'Get that thing off me, Al.'

Al shrugged. And the thought, which had invaded Ian's mind from without, gradually withdrew. And yet, a residue remained. He was no longer sure of his position.

'It's nothing compared to what Nicole's machinery can accomplish,' Al pointed out, seeing the expression on his face. 'One papoola here and there, and that planet-wide instrument of persuasion that Nicole has made out of TV there you have the real danger, Ian. The papoola is crude; you know you're being worked on. Not so when you listen to Nicole. The pressure is so subtle and so complete -- '

'I don't know about that,' Ian said. 'I just know that unless we're successful, unless we get to play at the White House, life as far as I'm concerned isn't worth living. And nobody put that idea in my head. It's just the way I feel; it's my own idea, dammit.' He held the door open, and Al passed on into the auditorium, carrying his jug by the handle. Ian followed, and a moment later the two of them were on the stage, facing the partially-filled hall.

'Have you ever seen her?' Al asked.

'I see her all the time.'

'I mean in reality. In person. So to speak, in the flesh.'

'Of course not,' Ian said. That was the entire point of their being successful, of getting to the White House. They would see her really,

not just the TV image; it would no longer be a fantasy -- it would be true.

'I saw her once,' Al said. 'I had just put the lot down, Jalopy Jungle Number Three, on a main business avenue in Shreveport, Louisiana. It was early in the morning, about eight o'clock. I saw official cars coming; naturally I thought it was the National Police -- I started to take off. But it wasn't. It was a motorcade, with Nicole in it, going to dedicate a new apartment building, the largest yet.'

'Yes,' Ian said. 'The Paul Bunyan.' The football team from The Abraham Lincoln played annually against its team, and always lost. The Paul Bunyan had over ten thousand inhabitants, and all of them came from administrative-class backgrounds; it was an exclusive apartment building of men and women verging on becoming *Ges.* and it had incredibly high monthly payments required of each tenant.

'You should have seen her,' Al said thoughtfully as he sat facing the audience, his jug on his lap. 'You know you always think that maybe in actual life they're not -- she's not, I mean -- as attractive as she shows up on the TV. I mean, they can control the image so completely. It's synthetic in so many goddam respects. But -- Ian, she was much more attractive. The TV can't catch the vitality, the glow, all the delicate colours of her skin. The luminosity of her hair.' He shook his head, tapping the papoola with his foot; it had taken up a position beneath his chair, out of sight.

'You know what it did to me, seeing her actually? It made me discontented. I was living pretty well; Luke pays me good salary. And I enjoy meeting the public. And I like operating this creature; it's a job that requires a certain artistic skill, so to speak. But after seeing Nicole Thibodeaux, I never really accepted myself and my life again.' He eyed Ian. 'I guess that's what you feel just seeing her on the TV.'

Ian nodded. He had begun to feel nervous now; in a few minutes they would be introduced. Their test had almost come.

'So that's why,' Al continued, 'I agreed to do this; get on the jug once more and have another try.' Seeing Ian gripping his jug so tautly, Al said, 'Shall I use the papoola or not? It's up to you.' He raised a quizzical eyebrow, but his face showed understanding.

Ian said, 'Use it.'

'Okay,' Al said, and reached his hand inside his coat.

Leisurely he stroked the controls. And, from beneath the chair, the papoola rolled forth, its antennae twitching drolly, its eyes crossing and uncrossing.

At once the audience became alert; people leaned forward to see, some of them chuckling with delight.

'Look,' a man said excitedly. 'It's the papoola!'

A woman rose to her feet to see more clearly, and Ian thought to

himself, *Everyone loves the papoola.*

We'll win whether we can play the jugs or not. And then what? Will meeting Nicole make us even more unhappy than we are? Is that what we'll get out of this: hopeless, massive discontent? An ache, a longing which can never be satisfied in this world? It was too late to back out, now. The doors of the auditorium had shut and Don Tishman was rising from his chair, rapping for order. ‘Okay, folks,' he said into his lapel microphone. ‘We're going to have a little display of some talent right now, for everyone's enjoyment. As you see on your programmes, first in order is a fine group, Duncan & Miller and Their Classical Jugs with a medley of Bach and Handel tunes that ought to set your feet tapping.' He grinned crookedly at Ian and Al, as if saying, ‘How does that suit you as an intro?'

Al paid no attention; he manipulated his controls and gazed thoughtfully at the audience, then at last picked up his jug, glanced at Ian and then tapped his foot. ‘The Little Fugue in G Minor' opened their medley, and Al began to blow on the jug, sending forth the lively theme. ‘Bum, bum, bum. Bum-bum-bum-bum bum bum de-bum. DE bum, DE bum, de de-de bum ... ‘ His cheeks puffed out red and swollen as he blew.

The papoola wandered across the stage, then lowered itself, by a series of gangly, foolish motions, into the first row of the audience. It had begun to go to work.

Al winked at Ian.

‘A Mr Strikerock to see you, doctor. Mr Charles Strikerock.' Amanda Connors peeped into Dr Superb's inner office, conscious of the load of the last few days and yet at the same time doing her job, too. Superb was aware of this.

Like a psychopomp, Amanda mediated between the gods and man; or rather in this case between the psychoanalyst and mere human beings. Sick ones at that.

‘All right.' Superb rose to meet the new patient, thinking to himself, *Is this the one?* Am I here solely to treat -- or rather to fail to treat -- this particular man? He had wondered that about each new patient in turn.

It made him tired, this ceaseless need to speculate. His thinking, ever since the passage of the McPhearson Act, had become obsessive; it went around and around, getting nowhere.

A tall, worried-looking, somewhat bald man with glasses slowly entered the office, his hand extended. ‘I want to thank you for taking me so quickly, doctor.' They shook. ‘You must have a terrific work schedule, these days.' Chic Strikerock seated himself facing the desk.

‘To some extent,' Superb murmured. But, as Pembroke had said, he could not turn down any new patients; on that condition he

remained open. ‘You look like I feel,' he said to Chic Strikerock. ‘Excessively trapped, over and above the norm. I guess we expect difficulties in living, but there ought to be some sort of limit.'

‘To be open about it,' Chic Strikerock said, ‘I'm about ready to shuck everything, my job, and -- mistress ... ‘

He paused, his lips twisting. ‘And join the goddam Sons of Job.' He shot a glance of anguish at Dr Superb. ‘That's it.'

‘All right,' Superb said, nodding in agreement. ‘But do you feel *compelled* to do this? Is it really a matter of choice?'

‘No, I have to do it -- I've got my back to the wall.'

Chic Strikerock pressed his shaking hands together, interlocking his long, thin fingers. ‘My life in society as a career man -- ‘

The phone on Superb's desk winked, on off, on off. An urgent call which Amanda wanted him to take.

‘Excuse me a moment, Mr Strikerock,' Dr Superb lifted the receiver. And, on the screen, the grotesquely-distorted miniature face of Richard Kongrosian formed, gaping as if the man were drowning. ‘Are you still in Franklin Aimes?' Superb asked, at once.

‘Yes,' Kongrosian's voice came in his ears from the shortrange audio receiver. The patient, Strikerock, could not hear it; he fooled with a match, hunched over, clearly resenting the interruption. ‘I just now heard on TV that you still exist. Doctor, something terrible is happening to me. *I'm becoming invisible.* No one can see me. They only can smell me; I'm turning into nothing but a repellent odour!'

Jesus Christ, Dr Superb thought.

‘Can you see me?' Kongrosian asked timidly. ‘On your screen?'

‘Yes I can,' Superb said.

‘Amazing.' Kongrosian seemed somewhat relieved. ‘Then at least electronic monitoring and scanning devices can pick me up. Maybe I can get by that way. What's your opinion? Have you had cases like this in the past? Has the science of psychopathology run up against this before? Does it have a *name?'*

‘It has a name.' Superb thought. Extreme crisis of the sense of identity. This is the appearance of overt psychosis; the compulsive-obsessive structure is crumbling. ‘I'll come over to Franklin Aimes this afternoon,' he told Kongrosian.

‘No, no,' Kongrosian protested, his eyes bulging in frenzy. ‘I can't permit that. In fact I shouldn't even be talking to you by phone; it's too dangerous. I'll write you a letter, Goodbye.'

‘Wait,' Superb said tersely.

The image remained on the screen. At least temporarily.

But, he knew, Kongrosian would not stay for long. The fugal pull was too great.

‘I have a patient,' Superb said. ‘So there's little I can do at this

moment. What if -- ‘

‘You hate me,' Kongrosian broke in. ‘Everyone does. Good god, I've *got* to be invisible! It's the only way I protect my life!'

‘I would think there ought to be certain, advantages to being invisible,' Superb said, ignoring what Kongrosian was saying. ‘Especially if you were interested in becoming a pruriently prying type of individual or a felon ... ‘

‘What kind of felon?' Kongrosian's attention had been snared.

Superb said, ‘I'll discuss that when I see you. I think we should make this as *Ge* as humanly possible. It's just too valuable a situation. Do you agree?'

‘I -- hadn't thought of it that way.'

‘Do so,' Superb said.

‘You envy me, do you, doctor?'

‘Very much so,' Superb said. ‘As an analyst I'm obviously quite a pruriently prying person myself.'

‘Interesting.' Kongrosian seemed much calmer, now. ‘For instance, it occurs to me now that I can get out of this damn hospital any time I want. I can roam the land, in fact. Except for the smell. No, you're forgetting the smell, doctor. It'll give me away. I appreciate what you're trying to do, but you're not taking all the facts into account.' Kongrosian managed a brief, wavering smile. ‘I think the thing for me to do is bind myself over to the Attorney General, Buck Epstein, or if not that, go back to the Soviet Union. Maybe the Pavlov Institute can help me. Yes, I should try that again; I tried it once before, you know.' A new thought came to him, then. ‘But they can't treat me if they can't see me. What a mess this is, Superb. Goddam.'

Maybe the best thing for you, Dr Superb thought, would be to do as Mr Strikerock is considering doing. Join Bertold Goltz and the infamous Sons of Job.

‘You know, doctor,' Kongrosian went on, ‘sometimes I think the actual basis of my psychiatric problem is that I'm unconsciously in love with Nicole. What do you say to that? I've just figured that out; it just came to me, and it's replete with clarity! The incest taboo or barrier or whatever it is has been called out by the direction my libido has taken, because of course Nicole is a mother figure. Am I correct?'

Dr Superb sighed.

Across from him Chic Strikerock fiddled miserably with his match, obviously growing more and more uncomfortable. The phone conversation had to be terminated. And right away.

But for the life of him, Superb could not figure out how to manage it.

Is this where I'm going to fail? He asked himself silently.

Is this what Pembroke, the NP man, using von Lessinger's

principle, foresaw? This man, Mr Charles Strikerock; I'm cheating him of his therapy -- he's being robbed by the phone conversation, right here before me. And there is nothing I can do.

'Nicole,' Kongrosian was saying rapidly, 'is the last true woman in our society. I know her, doctor; I've met her countless times, due to my illustrious career. I know who I'm talking about, don't you think? And -- '

Dr Superb hung up the phone.

'You hung up on him.' Chic Strikerock said, becoming fully alert. He ceased fooling with the match. 'Was that right to do?' Then he shrugged. 'I guess it's your business, not mine.' He tossed the match away.

'That man,' Superb said, 'has a delusion that's overpowering. He experiences Nicole Thibodeaux as real. Whereas actually she's the most synthetic object in our milieu.'

Shocked, Chic Strikerock blinked. 'W-what do you mean?' Stammering, he half-rose to his feet, then dropped weakly back. 'You're fishing. Trying to probe my mind in the short time we've got. In any case, I've got a concrete problem, not a delusional one like he had, whoever he is. I'm living with my brother's wife and using her presence to blackmail him; I'm forcing him to get me a job with Karp u. Sohnen. At least that's the problem on the surface. But under that there's something else, something deeper. I'm *afraid* of Julie, my brother's wife or ex-wife, whatever she is.

And I know why. It has to do with Nicole. Maybe I'm like that man on your phone; only I am not in love with her, with Nicole -- I'm terrified of her and that's why I'm scared of Julie, I guess in fact of all women. Does this make any sense, doctor?'

'The image,' Superb said, 'of the Bad Mother. Overpowering and cosmic.'

'It's because of weak-fibred men like me that Nicole can rule,' Chic said. 'I'm the reason why we've got matriarchal society -- I'm like a six-year-old kid.'

'You're not unique. You realize that. In fact, it's the national neurosis. The psychological fault of our times.'

Chic Strikerock said slowly, deliberately, 'If I joined Bertold Goltz and the Sons of Job I could be a real man.

'There's something else you could do, if you want to break free of the mother, of Nicole. Emigrate. To Mars. Buy one of those flivvers, those Loony Luke jalopies, the next time one of his peripatetic jalopy jungles lands close enough for you to go aboard.'

Haltingly, with a strange expression, Chic Strikerock said, 'My god. I never really seriously thought of that. It always seemed just -- frantic. Unreasonable. Done neurotically, in desperation.'

‘It would be better than joining Goltz, anyhow.'

‘What about Julie?'

Superb shrugged. ‘Take her along; why not? Is she good in bed?'

‘Please.'

‘Sorry.'

Chic Strikerock said, ‘I wonder what Loony Luke himself is like.'

‘A real bastard, I hear.'

‘Maybe that's good; maybe that's what I want. Need.'

Dr Superb said, ‘Time's up for today. I hope I helped you, at least a little. Next time -- ‘

‘You helped; you gave me a very good idea. Or rather, you ratified a very good idea inside me. Maybe I will emigrate to Mars; hell, why should I wait until Maury Frauenzimmer fires me? I'll quit right away and go locate a Loony Luke jalopy jungle. And if Julie wants to come, fine; and if not, also fine. She is good in bed, doctor, but not uniquely so. Not so good she can't be replaced. So -- ‘ Chic Strikerock rose from his chair. ‘I may not be seeing you again, doctor.' He held out his hand and they shook hands.

‘Drop me a postcard when you get to Mars,' Dr Superb said.

Nodding, Strikerock said, ‘I'll do that. Do you think you'll still be doing business here at this address?'

‘I don't know,' Dr Superb said. Perhaps, he thought, you are my last patient. The more I think about it the more I'm sure you're the one for whom I've been waiting. But only time would tell.

They walked together to the door of the office.

‘Anyhow,' Chic Strikerock said, ‘I'm not as bad off as that guy you talked to on the phone. Who was that? I think I've seen him somewhere before, or a picture of him. Maybe on TV; yes, that was it. He's some sort of a performer. You know, when you were talking to him I felt a sort of affinity towards him. As if we were both struggling together, both of us in deep, serious trouble and trying to get out some way, any way.'

‘Ummm,' Dr Superb said as he opened the door.

‘You're not going to tell me who he is; you're not allowed to. I understand. Well I wish him luck, whoever he is.'

‘He needs it,' Superb said. ‘Whoever he is. At this point.'

Caustically, Molly Dondoldo said, ‘How'd it feel, Nat, to be communicating with the great man himself? Because, of course, we all do agree; Bertold Goltz is *the* great man of our times.'

Nat Flieger shrugged. The auto-cab had now left the town of Jenner and was climbing a long grade, slower and slower, moving inland towards what appeared to be the rain forest proper, a huge damp mesa which seemed almost like something remaining from the Jurassic Period. A swamp of dinosaurs. Nat thought to himself. Not for

humans.

'I think Goltz made a convert,' Jim Planck said, with a wink at Molly. He grinned at Nat.

Rain, fine and light, had begun to descend silently; the windshield wipers of the auto-cab came on, throbbing in a loud rhythm that was both irregular and annoying. The auto-cab now turned from the main road -- which was at least paved -- on to a side road of red rock; the cab bumped along, pitching and wallowing; inside its mechanism gears changed as the cab creakily adjusted to the new conditions.

It did not sound to Nat as if the auto-cab was doing a very satisfactory job of things. He had the feeling that it was going to stop any moment now, would give up the job and quit.

'You know what I expect to see along here?' Molly said, gazing up at the dense foliage on both sides of the narrow, ascending road. 'I expect to see around the next bend a Loony Luke jalopy jungle, sitting there, parked waiting for us.'

'Just for us?' Jim Planck asked. 'Why just for us?'

'Because,' Molly said, 'we're about washed up.'

Around the next bend of the road there was a structure; Nat peered at it, wondering what it was. Old, shabby, abandoned-looking ... he realized all at once that he was seeing a *gas station.* Left over from the days of internal combustion engine autos. He was thunderstruck.

'An antique,' Molly said. 'A relic! How bizarre. Maybe we ought to stop and look at it. It's historical, like an old fort or an old adobe mill; please, Nat, stop the damn cab.'

Nat punched buttons on the dashboard and the auto-cab, groaning in an anguish of friction and malconceived selfcues, came to a stop before the gasoline station.

Warily, Jim Planck opened the door and stepped out. He had his Japanese-made camera with him and now he snapped it open, squinting in the dull, fog-shrouded light.

The mild rain made his face shiny; water dripped down the lenses of his glasses and he removed them, stuffing them into his coat pocket. 'I'll take a couple shots of it,' he said to Nat and Molly.

In a soft voice Molly said to Nat, 'There's someone in there. Don't move or say anything. He's watching us.'

Getting out of the cab Nat crossed the red rock road to the gasoline station. He saw the man inside rise and come to meet him; the door of the building swung open. A hunched man with a huge deformed jaw and teeth faced him; the man gestured and began to talk.

'What's he saying?' Jim said to Nat, looking frightened.

The man, elderly, mumbled, 'Hig, hig, hig.' Or so it sounded to

Nat. The man was trying to tell him something and yet he could not. He continued to try. And Nat, at last, thought he made out real words; he strained to understand, cupping his ear and waiting while the great-jawed old man mumbled on, anxiously, still gesturing.

'He's asking,' Molly said to Nat, 'if we brought his mail.'

Jim said, 'It must be a custom around here, for cars coming up this road to bring the mail from town.' To the elderly man with the massive jaw Jim said, 'Sorry, we didn't know. We don't have your mail.'

Nodding, the man ceased his noises; he seemed resigned.

He clearly understood.

'We're looking for Richard Kongrosian,' Nat said to the elderly man. 'Are we on the right road?'

The man peered at him sideways, slyly. 'Got any vegetables?'

'Vegetables!' Nat said.

'I can eat vegetables pretty good.' The elderly man winked at him and held out his hand, waiting, hoping.

'Sorry,' Nat said, disconcerted. He turned to Jim and Molly. 'Vegetables,' he said. 'Could you understand him? That's what he said, isn't it?'

The elderly man mumbled, 'I can't eat meat. Wait.' He fumbled in his coat pocket and brought out a printed card which he passed to Nat. The card, dirty and shabby, could barely be read; Nat held it up to the light, squinting as he sought to make out the printed lettering.

FEED ME AND I WILL TELL YOU
ANYTHING YOU WANT TO HEAR.
COURTESY OF THE CHUPPERS ASSN.

'I am a chupper,' the elderly man said, and took the card suddenly back, returning it to his coat pocket.

'Let's get out of here,' Molly said to Nat, quietly.

A radiation-spawned race, Nat thought. The chuppers of Northern California. Their enclave lay here. He wondered how many of them there were. Ten? A thousand? And this was where Richard Kongrosian had chosen to live.

But perhaps Kongrosian was right. These were people, despite their malformity. They received mail, probably had little jobs or tasks, perhaps lived on county relief if they couldn't work. They were bothering no one and certainly they were harmless. He felt discouraged at his own reaction -- his initial, instinctive aversion.

To the elderly chupper Nat said, 'Would you like a coin?'

He held out a platinum five-dollar piece.

Nodding, the chupper accepted the coin. 'Thankya.'

'Does Kongrosian live along this road?' Nat asked once again.

The chupper pointed.

‘Okay,' Jim Planck said. ‘Let's go. We're heading the right way.' He glanced urgently at Nat and Molly. ‘Come on.'

The three of them re-entered the auto-cab; Nat started it up and they drove on past the gasoline station and the old chupper, who stood expressionlessly, watching them go as if he had once more become inert, turned off like a simulacrum, a mere machine.

‘Wow,' Molly said, and let out her breath raggedly. ‘What the hell was *that?'*

‘Expect more,' Nat said briefly.

‘Goodness god in heaven,' Molly said. ‘Kongrosian must be nutty as they say, living here. I wouldn't live up here in this swamp for anything. I wish I hadn't come. Let's record him at the studio, okay? I feel like turning back.'

The auto-cab crawled along, passed under trailing vines, and then all at once they were facing the remains of a town.

A rotting sequence of wooden buildings with faded lettering and broken windows, and yet not abandoned. Here and there, along the weed-split sidewalks, Nat saw people; or rather, he thought, chuppers. Five or six of them making their way haltingly along, on their errands, whatever they might be; god knew what one did here. No phones, no mail. Maybe, he thought, Kongrosian finds it peaceful here.

There was no sound, except that of the mist-like rain falling.

Maybe once you get used to it -- but he did not think he could damn well ever get used to it. The factor of decay was too much at work, here. The absence of anything new, of any blossoming or growing. They can be chuppers if they want or if they have to be, he thought, but they ought to try harder, try to keep their settlement in repair. This is awful.

Like Molly he wished, now, that he hadn't come.

‘I would think a long time,' he said aloud, ‘before I'd plunk my life down in this area. But if you could do it you'd have accepted one of the most difficult aspects of life.'

‘And what's that?' Jim asked.

‘The supremacy of the past,' Nat said. In this region the past ruled thoroughly, entirely. Their collective past: the war which had preceded their immediate era, its consequences. The ecological changes in everyone's life. This was a museum, but alive. Movement, of a circular sort ... he shut his eyes. I wonder, he thought, if new chuppers are born. It must be genetically carried; I know it is. Or rather, he thought, I'm afraid it is. This is a waning sporting, and yet -- it continues on.

They have survived. And that's good for the real environment, for the evolutionary process. That's what does it, from the trilobite on. He felt sick.

And then he thought, *I've seen this malformity before.*

In pictures. In reconstructions. The reconstructions, the guesses, were quite good, evidently. Perhaps they had been corrected through von Lessinger's equipment. Stooped bodies, massive jaw, inability to eat meat because of a lack of incisor teeth, great difficulty speaking. ‘Molly,' he said aloud, ‘you know what these are, these chuppers?'

She nodded.

Jim Planck said Neanderthal. They're not radiation freaks; they're throwbacks.'

The auto-cab crept on, through the chuppers' town.

Searching in its blind, mechanical way for the nearby home of the world-famous concert pianist Richard Kongrosian.

9

The Theodoras Nitz commercial squeaked, ‘In the presence of strangers do you feel you *don't quite exist?* Do they seem not to notice you, as if you were invisible? On a bus or spaceship do you sometimes look around you and discover that no one, *absolutely no one,* recognizes you or cares about you and quite possibly may even -- ‘

With his carbon dioxide-powered pellet rifle, Maury Frauenzimmer carefully shot the Nitz commercial as it hung pressed against the far wall of his cluttered office. It had squeezed in during the night, had greeted him in the morning with its tinny harangue.

Broken, the commercial dropped to the floor. Maury crushed it with his solid, compacted weight and then returned the pellet rifle to its rack.

‘The mail,' Chic Strikerock said. ‘Where's today's mail?'

He had been searching everywhere in the office since his arrival.

Maury noisily sipped coffee from his cup and said, ‘Look on top of the files. Under that rag we use to clean the keys of the typewriter.' He bit into a breakfast doughnut, the sugarcovered type. He could see that Chic was behaving oddly and he wondered what it signified.

All at once Chic said, ‘Maury, I've got something I wrote out for you.' He tossed a folded piece of paper on to the desk.

Without examining it Maury knew what it was.

‘I'm resigning,' Chic said. He was pale.

‘Please don't,' Maury said. ‘Something will come along. I can keep the firm functioning.' He did not open the letter; he left it where Chic had tossed it. ‘What would you do if you left here?' Maury asked.

‘Emigrate to Mars.'

The intercom on the desk buzzed, and their secretary, Greta Trupe, said, ‘Mr Frauenzimmer, a Mr Garth McRae to see you with several other gentlemen, in a group.'

I wonder who they are, Maury wondered. ‘Don't send them in yet,' he said to Greta. ‘I'm in conference with Mr Strikerock.'

‘Go ahead and conduct your business,' Chic said. ‘I'm going. I'll leave my resignation letter there on your desk. Wish me luck.'

‘I wish you luck.' Maury felt depressed and ill. He stared down at the desk until the door opened and closed and Chic had gone. What a hell of a way to begin the day, Maury thought. Picking up the letter he opened it, glanced at it, folded it once more. He pressed a button on the desk intercom and said, ‘Miss Trupe, send in -- the name you said, McRae or whatever it was. And his party.'

‘Yes, Mr Frauenzimmer.'

The door from the outer office opened and Maury drew himself

up to face what he recognized at once to be government officials; two of them wore the grey of the National Police, and the leader of the group, evidently McRae, had the bearing of a major official of the executive branch; in other words a highly-placed *Ge*.

Rising clumsily to his feet, Maury extended his hand and said, 'Gentlemen, what can I do for you?'

Shaking hands with him, McRae said, 'You're Frauenzimmer?'

'Correct,' Maury answered. His heart laboured and he had difficulty breathing. Were they going to close him down? As they had moved in on the Vienna School of psychiatrists? 'What have I done?' he asked, and heard his voice waver with apprehension. It was one trouble after another.

McRae smiled. 'Nothing, so far. We're here to initiate discussion of the placing of an order with your firm. However, this involves knowledge of a *Ge* level. May I rip out your intercom?'

'P-pardon?' Maury said, taken aback.

Nodding to the NP men, McRae stepped aside; the police moved in and swiftly made the intercom inoperative. They then inspected the walls, the furniture; they examined scrupulously every inch of the room and its equipment and then they nodded to McRae to continue.

McRae said, 'All right. Frauenzimmer, we have specs with us for a sim we'd like constructed. Here.' He held out a sealed envelope. 'Go over this. We'll wait.'

Opening the envelope, Maury studied its contents.

'Can you do it?' McRae asked, presently.

Raising his head, Maury said, 'These specifications are for a der Alte.'

'Correct.' McRae nodded.

Then that's it, Maury realized. That's the piece of *Ge* knowledge; I'm now a *Ge*.

It's happened in an instant. I'm on the inside. Too bad Chic left; poor goddam Chic, what bad timing, bad luck, on his part. If he had stayed five minutes longer ...

'It's been true for fifty years,' McRae said.

They were drawing him in. Making him as much a part of this as possible now.

'Good grief,' Maury said. 'I never guessed, watching it perform on TV, making its speeches. And here I build the damn things myself.' He was staggered.

'Karp did a good job,' McRae said. 'Especially on the current one, Rudi Kalbfleisch. We wondered if you'd guessed.'

'Never,' Maury said. 'Not one time.' Not in a million years.

'Can you do it? Build it?'

'Sure.' Maury nodded.

'When will you start?'

'Right away.'

'Good. You realize, naturally, that initially NP men will have to be kept here, to ensure security maintenance.'

'Okay,' Maury murmured. 'If you have to, you have to. Listen, excuse me a moment.' He edged past them, to the door and through, to the outer office; taken by surprise they permitted him to go. 'Miss Trupe, did you see what way Mr Strikerock went?' he asked.

'He just drove off, Mr Frauenzimmer. Towards the autobahn I guess he went back home to The Abraham Lincoln where he lives.'

You poor guy, Maury thought. He shook his head.

The Chic Strikerock luck; still functioning. Now he began to feel elated.

This changes everything, he realized. I'm back in business; I'm caterer to the king -- or rather, I supply the White House. Same thing. Yes, it's the same thing!

He returned to his office, where McRae and the others waited; they eyed him rather darkly. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I was looking for my sales chief. I wanted to pull him back due to this. We won't want to take any new orders for a while, so we can be free to concentrate on this.' He hesitated. 'As to the cost.'

'We'll sign a contract,' Garth McRae said. 'You'll be guaranteed your costs plus forty per cent. The Rudi Kalbfleisch we acquired for a total net sum of one billion USEA dollars, plus of course the cost of perpetual maintenance and repair since the acquisition.'

'Oh yeah,' Maury agreed. 'You wouldn't want it to stop working in the middle of a speech.' He tried to chuckle but found he could not.

'How does that sound, roughly? Say between one bill and one-five.'

Maury said thickly, 'Um, fine.' His head felt as if it were about to roll off his shoulders and plunge to the floor.

Studying him, McRae said, 'You're a small firm, Frauenzimmer. You and I are both aware of that. Don't get your hopes up. This will not make you a big firm, such as Karp und Sohnen Werke. However, it will guarantee your continued existence; obviously we're prepared to underwrite you economically speaking for as long as is necessary.

We've gone exhaustively into your books -- does that petrify you? -- and we know that you've been operating in the red for months now.'

'True,' Maury said.

'But your work is good,' Garth McRae continued. 'We've minutely inspected examples of it, both here and where it actually functions on Luna and Mars. You display authentic craftsmanship, more so, I feel, than the Karp Werke. That of course is why we're here today instead of there with Anton and old Felix.'

‘I wondered,' Maury said. So that was why the government had decided this time to let the contract to him, not Karp. He thought, did Karp build *all* the der Alte simulacra up to now? Good question. If this were so -- what a radical departure in government procurement policy this was! But better not to ask.

‘Have a cigar,' Garth McRae said, holding an Optimo *admiral* out to him. ‘Extra mild. Pure Florida leaf.'

‘Thank you.' Maury gratefully -- and fumblingly -- accepted the big greenish cigar. Both he and Garth McRae lit up, gazing at one another in what all at once had become calm, assured silence.

The news posted on The Abraham Lincoln's communal bulletin board that Duncan & Millar had been chosen by the talent scout to perform at the White House astounded Edgar Stone; he read the announcement again and again, searching for the joker in it and wondering how the little nervous, cringing man had managed to do it.

There's been cheating, Stone said to himself. Just as I passed him on his relpol tests ... he's got somebody else to falsify a few results for him along the talent line. He himself had heard the jugs; he had been present at that programme, and Duncan & Miller, Classical Jugs, simply were not that good. They were *good,* admittedly ... but intuitively he knew that more was involved.

Deep inside him he experienced anger, a resentment that he had ever falsified Duncan's test-score. I put him on the road to success, Stone realized; I saved him. And now he's on his way to the White House, out of here entirely.

No wonder Ian Duncan had done so poorly on his relpol test. He had been busy practising on his jug, obviously; Duncan had no time for the commonplace realities which the rest of humanity had to cope with. It must be terrific to be an artist, Stone thought with bitterness. You're exempt from all the rules and responsibilities; you can do just as you like.

He sure made a fool out of me, Stone said to himself.

Striding rapidly down the second-floor hall, Stone arrived at the office of the building skypilot; he rang the bell and the door opened, showing him the sight of the skypilot deep in work at his desk, his face wrinkled with fatigue. ‘Uh, father,' Stone said, ‘I'd like to confess. Can you spare a few minutes? It's very urgently on my mind, my sins I mean.'

Rubbing his forehead, Patrick Doyle nodded. ‘Jeez,' he murmured. ‘It either rains or it pours; I've had ten presidents in today so far, using the confessionator. Go ahead.'

He pointed wearily to the alcove which opened on to his office. ‘Sit down and plug yourself in. I'll be listening while I fill out these 4-10 forms from Berlin.'

Filled with righteous indignation, his hands trembling, Edgar Stone attached the electrodes of the confessionator to the correct spots of his scalp, and then, picking up the microphone, began to confess. The tapedrums of the machine turned slowly as he spoke. ‘Moved by a false type pity,' he said, ‘I infracted a rule of this building. But mainly I am concerned not with the act itself but with the motives behind it; the act is merely the outgrowth of a false attitude towards my fellow residents. This individual, my neighbour Mr Ian Duncan, did poorly on his recent relpol test and I foresaw him being evicted from The Abraham Lincoln. I identified with him because subconsciously I regard myself as a failure, both as a resident of this building and as a man, so I falsified his score to indicate that he had passed. Obviously a new relpol test will have to be given to Mr Ian Duncan and the one which I scored will have to be marked void.' He eyed the skypilot, but there was no evident reaction.

That will take care of Duncan and his Classic Jug, Stone said to himself.

By now the confessionator had analysed his confession; it popped a card out, and Doyle rose to his feet to receive it.

After a long, careful scrutiny he glanced keenly up. ‘Mr Stone,' he said, ‘the view expressed here is that your confession is no confession. What do you *really* have on your mind? Go back and begin all over; you haven't probed down deeply enough and brought up the genuine material And I suggest you start out by confessing that you misconfessed consciously and deliberately.'

‘No such thing,' Stone said, or rather tried to say; his voice had gone out on him, numbed by dismay. ‘P-perhaps I could discuss this with you informally, sir. I did falsify Ian Duncan's test score; that's a fact. Now, perhaps my motives for doing it -- ‘

Doyle interrupted. ‘Aren't you jealous of Duncan now? What with his success with the jug, White House-wards?'

There was silence.

‘This -- could be,' Stone rasped in admission at last. ‘But it doesn't change the fact that by all rights Ian Duncan shouldn't be living here; he should be evicted, my motives notwithstanding. Look it up in the Communal Apartment building Code. I know there's a section covering a situation such as this.'

‘But you can't get out of here,' the skypilot persisted, ‘without confessing; you must satisfy the machine. You're attempting to force eviction of a neighbour to satisfy your own emotional, psychological needs. Confess that, and *then* perhaps we can discuss the Code ruling as it pertains to Duncan.'

Stone groaned and once more attached the intricate system of electrodes to his scalp. ‘All right,' he grated. ‘I hate Ian Duncan

because he's artistically gifted and I'm not. I'm willing to be examined by a twelve-resident jury of my neighbours to see what the penalty for my sin is; but I insist that Duncan be given another relpol test! I won't give up on this -- he has no right to be dwelling here amongst us. It's morally and legally *wrong.'*

'At least you're being honest, now,' Doyle said.

'Actually,' Stone said, 'I enjoy jug band playing; I liked their little act, the other night. But I have to behave in a manner which I believe to be in the public interest.'

The confessionator, it seemed to him, snorted in derision as it popped a second card. But perhaps it was only his imagination.

'You're just getting yourself deeper and deeper,' Doyle said, reading the card. 'Look at this.' He grimly passed the card to Stone. 'Your mind is a riot of confused, ambivalent motives. *When was the last time you confessed?'*

Flushing, Stone mumbled, 'I think -- last August. Pape Jones was the skypilot then. Yes, it must have been August.'

Actually, it had been early July.

'A lot of work will have to be done with you,' Doyle said, lighting a cigarillo and leaning back in his chair.

The opening number on their White House programme they had decided after much discussion and hot argument, would be the Bach 'Chaconne in D.' Al had always liked it, despite the difficulties involved, the double-stopping and all. Even thinking about the Chaconne made Ian Duncan nervous.

He wished, now that it had at last been decided, that he had held out for the much simpler 'Fifty Unaccompanied Cello Suite.' But too late now. Al had sent the information to the White House A & R secretary, Mr Harold Slezak.

Al said, 'Don't for heaven's sake worry; you've got the number two jug in this. Do you mind being second jug to me?'

'No,' Ian said. It was a relief, actually; Al had the far more difficult part.

Outside the perimeter of Jalopy Jungle Number three the papoola moved, crisscrossing the sidewalk in its gliding, quiet pursuit of a sales prospect. It was only ten in the morning, and no one worth collaring had come along, as yet.

Today the lot had been set up in the hilly section of Oakland, California, among the winding, tree-shrouded streets of the better residential section. Across from the lot, Ian could see The Joe Louis, a peculiarly-shaped but striking apartment building of a thousand units, mostly occupied by very well-to-do Negroes. The building, in the morning sun, appeared especially neat and cared for. A guard, with badge and gun, patrolled the entrance, stopping anyone who did not

live there from entering.

‘Slezak has to okay the programme,' Al reminded him.

‘Maybe Nicole won't want to hear the Chaconne; she's got very specialized tastes and they're changing all the time.'

In his mind Ian saw Nicole propped up in her enormous bed, in her pink, frilly robe, her breakfast on a tray beside her as she scanned the programme schedules presented to her for her approval. Already she's heard about us, he thought.

She knows of our existence.

In that case, we really do exist. Like a child that has to have its mother watching what it does, we're brought into being, validated consensually, by Nicole's gaze.

And when she takes her eye off us, he thought, then what? What happens to us afterwards? Do we disintegrate, sink back into oblivion? Back, he thought, into random, unformed atoms. Where we came from, the world of nonbeing, The world we've been in all our lives, up until now.

‘And,' Al said, ‘she may ask us for an encore. She may even request a particular favourite. I've researched it, and it seems she sometimes asks to hear Schumann's "The Happy Farmer." Got that in mind? We'd better work "The Happy Farmer" up, just in case.' He blew a few toots on his jug, thoughtfully.

‘I can't do it,' Ian said abruptly. ‘I can't go on. It means too much to me. Something will go wrong; we won't please her and they'll boot us out. And we'll never be able to forget.'

‘Look,' Al began. ‘We have the papoola. And that gives us -- ‘ He broke off. A tall, stoop-shouldered, elderly man in an expensive natural fibre-grey suit was coming up the sidewalk. ‘My god, it's Luke himself,' Al said. He looked frightened. ‘I've only seen him twice before in my life. Something must be wrong.'

‘Better reel in the papoola,' Ian said. The papoola had begun to move towards Loony Luke.

With a bewildered expression on his face Al said, ‘I can't.'

He fiddled desperately with the controls at his waist. ‘It won't respond.'

The papoola reached Luke, and Luke bent down, picked it up and continued on towards the lot, the papoola under his arm.

‘He's taken precedence over me,' Al said. He looked at Ian numbly.

The door of the office opened and Loony Luke entered.

‘We got a report that you've been using this in your own time, for purposes of your own,' he said to Al, his voice low and gravelly. ‘You were told not to do that; the papoola belongs to the lot, not to the operator.'

Al said, ‘Aw, come on, Luke -- ‘

‘You ought to be fired,' Luke said, ‘but you're a good salesman so I'll keep you on. Meanwhile, you'll have to make your quota without help.' Tightening his grip on the papoola, he started out. ‘My time is valuable; I have to go.'

He saw Al's jug. ‘That's not a musical instrument; it's a thing to put whisky in.'

Al said, ‘Listen, Luke, this is publicity. Performing for Nicole means that the network of jalopy jungles will gain prestige. Got it?'

‘I don't want prestige,' Luke said, pausing at the door. ‘There's no catering to Nicole Thibodeaux by me; let her run her society the way she wants and I'll run the jungles the way I want. She leaves me alone and I'll leave her alone and that's fine with me. Don't mess it up. Tell Slezak you can't appear and forget about it; no grown man in his right senses would be hooting into an empty bottle anyhow.'

‘That's where you're wrong,' Al said. ‘Art can be found in the most mundane daily walks of life, like in these jugs for instance.'

Luke, picking his teeth with a silver toothpick, said, ‘Now you don't have a papoola to soften the First Family up for you. Better think about that. Do you really expect to make it without the papoola?' He grinned.

After a pause Al said to Ian, ‘He's right. The papoola did it for us. But -- hell, let's go on anyhow.'

‘You've got guts,' Luke said. ‘But no sense. Still, I have to admire you. I can see why you've been a top-notch salesman for the organization; you don't give up. Take the papoola the night you perform at the White House and then return it to me the next morning.' He tossed the round, buglike creature to Al; grabbing it, Al hugged it against his chest like a big pillow. ‘Maybe it would be good publicity for the jungles,' Luke said meditatively. ‘But I know this. Nicole doesn't like us. Too many people have slipped out of her hands by means of us; we're a leak in mama's structure and mama knows it.' Again he grinned, showing gold teeth.

Al said, ‘Thanks, Luke.'

‘But I'll operate the papoola,' Luke said. ‘By remote. I'm a little more skilled than you; after all, I *built* them.'

‘Sure,' Al said. ‘I'll have my hands full playing anyhow.'

‘Yes,' Luke said, ‘you'll need both hands for that bottle.'

Something in Luke's tone made Ian Duncan uneasy.

What's he up to? he wondered. But in any case he and his buddy Al Miller had no choice; they had to have the papoola working for them. And no doubt Luke could do a good job operating it; he had already proved his superiority over Al, just now, and as Luke said, Al would be busy blowing away on his jug. But still ...

‘Loony Luke,' Ian said, ‘have you ever met Nicole?' It was a sudden thought on his part, an intuition.

‘Sure,' Luke said steadily. ‘Years ago. I had some hand puppets; my dad and I travelled around putting on puppet shows. We finally played the White House.'

‘What happened there?' Ian asked.

Luke, after a pause, said, ‘She -- didn't care for us. Said something about our puppets being indecent.'

And you hate her, Ian realized. You never forgave her.

‘Were they?' he asked Luke.

‘No,' Luke answered. ‘True, one act was a strip show; we had follies girl puppets. But nobody ever objected before. My dad took it hard but it didn't bother me.' His face was impassive.

Al said, ‘Was Nicole the First Lady that far back?'

‘Oh yes,' Luke said. ‘She's been in office for seventy-three years; didn't you know that?'

‘It isn't possible,' both Al and Ian said, almost together.

‘Sure it is,' Luke said. ‘She's a really old woman, now. Must be. A grandmother. But she still looks good, I guess. You'll know when you see her.'

Stunned, Ian said, ‘On TV -- ‘

‘Oh yeah,' Luke agreed. ‘On TV she looks around twenty. But go to the history books ... except of course they're banned to everyone except *Ges*. I mean the *real* history texts; not the ones they give you for studying for those relpol tests. Once you look it up you can figure it out for yourself. The facts are all there. Buried down somewhere.'

The facts, Ian realized, mean nothing when you can see with your own eyes she's as young-looking as ever. And we see that every day.

Luke you're lying, he thought. We know it; we all know it.

My buddy Al saw her; Al would have said, if she was really like that. You hate her; that's your motive. Shaken, he turned his back to Luke; not wanting to have anything more to do with the man now. Seventy-three years in office -- that would make Nicole almost ninety, now. He shuddered at the idea; he blocked it out of his thoughts. Or at least he tried to.

‘Good luck, boys,' Luke said, chewing on his toothpick.

It's too bad, Al Miller thought, that the government cracked down on those psychoanalysts. He glanced across his office at his buddy Ian Duncan. Because you're in a bad way, Al realized. But actually there was one of them left; he had heard about it over TV. Dr Superb or something like that.

‘Ian,' he said. ‘You need help. You're not going to be able to blow that jug for Nicole, not the way you're feeling.'

‘I'll be okay,' Ian said shortly.

Al said, ‘Ever been to a psychiatrist?'

‘Couple times. Long ago.'

‘You think they're better than chemical therapy?'

‘Anything's better than chemical therapy.'

If he's the only psychoanalyst still practising in the entire USEA, Al thought, he's no doubt swamped. Couldn't possibly take on any new patients.

However, for the heck of it, he looked up the number, picked up his phone and dialled.

‘Who're you calling?' Ian asked suspiciously.

‘Dr Superb. The last of the -- ‘

‘I know. Who's it for? You? Me?'

‘Both of us maybe,' Al said.

‘But primarily for me.'

Al did not answer. A girl's image -- she had lovely, enlarged, high-rise breasts -- had formed on the screen and in his ear her voice said, ‘Dr Superb's office.'

‘Is the doctor accepting any new patients at this time?' Al asked, scrutinizing her image fixedly.

‘Yes he is,' the girl said in a vigorous, firm tone of voice.

‘Terrific!' Al said, pleased and surprised. ‘I and my partner would like to come in, whenever it's possible; the sooner the better.' He gave her his name and Ian's.

‘What about Friday at nine-thirty in the morning?' the girl asked.

‘It's a deal,' Al said. ‘Thanks a lot, miss. Ma'am.' He hung up violently. ‘We got it!" he said to Ian. ‘Now we can thrash our worries out with someone qualified to render a professional assist. You know, talk about mother image -- did you see that girl? Because -- ‘

‘You can go,' Ian said. ‘I'm not.'

Al said quietly, ‘If you don't go, I'm not playing my jug at the White House. So you better go.'

Ian stared at him.

‘I mean it,' Al said.

There was a long, awkward silence.

‘I'll go,' Ian said, at last. ‘But once only. No more after this Friday.'

‘That's up to the doctor.'

‘Listen,' Ian said. ‘If Nicole Thibodeaux is ninety years old no psychotherapy is going to help me.'

‘You're that much involved emotionally with her? A woman you've never seen? That's schizophrenic. Because the fact is you're involved with -- ‘ Al gestured. ‘An illusion. Something synthetic, unreal.'

‘What's unreal and what's real? To me she's more real than anything else; than you, even. Even than myself, my own life.'

‘Holy smoke,' Al said. He was impressed. ‘Well, at least you have something to live for.'

‘Right,' Ian said, and nodded.

‘We'll see what Superb says on Friday,' Al said. ‘We'll ask him just how schizophrenic -- if at all -- it is.' He shrugged.

‘Maybe I'm wrong; maybe it isn't.' Maybe it's Luke and I who are the insane ones, he thought. To him, Luke for example, was much more real, much more an influencing factor, than Nicole Thibodeaux. But then, he had seen Nicole in the flesh, and Ian had not. That made all the difference, although he was not sure quite why.

He picked up his jug and began practising once more.

And, after a pause, Ian Duncan did the same, joining in.

Together, they puffed away.

10

The Army Major, thin, small and erect, said, 'Frau Thibodeaux, this is the Reichsmarschall, Herr Hermann Goering.'

The heavily built man, wearing -- incredibly -- a toga-style white robe and holding on a leather leash what appeared to be a lion cub, stepped forward and said in German, 'I am glad to meet you, Mrs Thibodeaux.'

'Reichsmarschall,' Nicole said, 'do you know where you are at this moment?'

'Yes,' Goering nodded. To the lion cub he said severely, *'Sei ruhig,* Marsi.' He fussed with the cub, calming it.

All this Bertold Goltz watched. He had gone slightly ahead in his time, by use of his own von Lessinger equipment; he had become impatient waiting for Nicole to arrange the transfer of Goering. Here it was now; or rather, here it would be in seven more hours.

It was easy, possessing von Lessinger equipment, to penetrate the White House despite its NP guards; Goltz had merely gone far back into the past, before the White House existed, and then had returned to this near future. He had done such a thing several times already and would do it again; he knew that because he had run on to his future self, caught in the act. It amused him, that meeting; not only was he able to observe Nicole freely but he could also observe his past and future selves -- the future, at least, in terms of *possibility.*

Of potentiality, rather than actuality. The vista spread out for his inspection of the *perhaps.*

They will make a deal, Goltz decided. Nicole and Goering; the Reichsmarschall, taken first from 1941 and then from 1944, will be shown the ruined Germany of 1945, will see the end in store for the Nazis -- will see himself in the dock at Nuremberg, and, at last, will view his own suicide by a poison carried in a rectal suppository. This will rather influence him, to say the least. A deal will not be difficult to hatch out; the Nazis, even normally, were experts at deals.

A few miracle weapons from the future, appearing at the end of World War Two, and the Age of Barbarism would last -- not thirteen years -- but, as Hitler had sworn, a thousand. A death ray, laser beams, hydrogen bombs in the 100 megaton range ... would assist the armed forces of the Third Reich considerably. Plus, of course, the A-1 and the A-2; or, as the Allies had called them, the V-1 and V-2. Now the Nazis would have an A-3, A-4, and so on, without limit, if necessary.

Goltz frowned. For, in addition to this, other possibilities, murky and dense, spread out parallel with an almost occult darkness

surrounding them. What did these less-likely futures consist of? Dangerous, and yet surely better than the clear one, the track laden with miracle weapons. ‘You, there,' a White House NP man called, suddenly catching sight of Goltz, as he stood partially concealed in the corner of the Bog Orchid Room. The guard instantly whipped out a pistol and took aim.

The conference between Thibodeaux, Goering, and four military advisors, abruptly terminated. All turned towards Goltz and the NP man.

‘Frau,' Goltz said, a parody of Goering's greeting. He stepped forth, confidently; after all, he previewed this with his von Lessinger gear. ‘You know who I am. The spectre at the feast.' He chuckled.

But of course the White House possessed von Lessinger equipment, too; they had anticipated this, just as he had.

This exposure had in it the element of fatality. It could not be avoided; no alternate tracks branched off, here ... not that Goltz wished for them. Long ago he had learned that ultimately there was no future for him in anonymity.

‘Some other time, Goltz,' Nicole said with distaste.

‘Now,' Goltz said, walking towards her.

The NP man glanced at her for instructions; he appeared highly confused.

Nicole waved him irritably.

‘Who is this?' The Reichsmarschall inquired, studying Goltz.

Goltz said, ‘Just a poor Jew. Not like Emil Stark, who I notice is not here, Nicole, despite your promise. There are many poor Jews, Reichsmarschall. In your time and ours both. I have nothing of cultural or economic value which you can confiscate; no art work, no *Geld.* Sorry.' He seated himself at the conference table and poured a glass of ice water from the pitcher at hand.

‘Is your pet, Marsi, feral? *Ja oder nein?'*

‘No,' Goering said, petting the cub expertly, He had sat down, placing the cub on the table before him; it curled up obediently, its eyes half-closed.

‘My presence,' Goltz said, ‘my Jewish presence, is unwanted. I wonder why Emil Stark isn't here. Why not. Nicole?' He eyed her. ‘Did you fear to offend the Reichsmarschall? Strange ... after all, Himmler dealt with Jews in Hungary, through Eichmann. And there is a Jewish general in the Reichsmarschall's Luftwaffe, a certain General Milch. True, Herr Reichmarschall?' He turned to Goering.Looking peeved, Goering said, ‘I wouldn't know about Milch; he's a good man -I can say that much.'

‘You see,' Bertold Goltz said to Nicole, ‘Herr Goering is accustomed to dealing with *Juden.* Right, Herr Goering? You don't

have to answer; I've observed it for myself.'

Goering glared at him sourly.

'Now this deal -- ' Goltz began.

'Bertold,' Nicole interrupted savagely, 'get out of here! I've let your street fighters roam at will -- I'll have them rounded up if you interfere with this. You know what my objective is here. You of all people ought to approve.'

'But I don't,' Goltz said.

One of the Army advisors snapped, 'Why not?'

'Because,' Goltz said, 'once the Nazis have won World War Two by your aid, *they will massacre the Jews anyhow.*

And not just those in Europe and White Russia but in England and the United States and Latin America as well.' He spoke calmly. After all, he had seen it, had explored, by means of his von Lessinger equipment, several of these dreadful alternative futures. 'Remember, the objective in the war for the Nazis was the extermination of World Jewry; it was not merely a byproduct.'

There was silence.

To the NP man, Nicole said, 'Get him now.'

The NP man, pointing his gun, fired at Goltz.

Goltz, timing it perfectly, at the same instant the gun was pointed at him made contact with the von Lessinger effect surrounding him. The scene, with its participants, blurred and was lost. He remained in the same room, the Bog Orchid, but the people were gone. He was alone, yet now in the midst of the elusive ghosts of the future, summoned by the device.

He saw, in deranged procession, the psychokinetic Richard Kongrosian involved in weird situations, first with his rituals of cleansing and then with Wilder Pembroke; the Commissioner of the NP had done something, but Goltz could not make out what. And then he saw himself, first holding vast authority and then abruptly, unaccountably, dead. Nicole, too, drifted past his range of vision, altered in various new ways which he could not comprehend. Death seemed to exist everywhere in the future, a potential awaiting everyone it seemed. What did this signify? An hallucinosis? The collapse of certitude appeared to lead directly to Richard Kongrosian. It was an effect of the psychokinetic power, a distortion of fabric of the future produced by the man's parapsychological talent.

If Kongrosian knew, Goltz thought. Strength of this sort a mystery even to the owner. Kongrosian, tangled in the maze of his mental illness, virtually unable to function and yet still imposing, still looming vastly on the landscape of the tomorrows, of our days ahead. If I could only penetrate *this,* Goltz realized. This man who is -- will become -- the cardinal enigma for all of us ... then I would have it.

The future would no longer consist of imperfect shades, blended in configurations which customarily reason -- mine, anyhow -- can never manage to untangle.

In his room at Franklin Aimes Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Richard Kongrosian declared aloud, 'I am totally invisible now.' He held up his hand and arm, saw nothing. 'It's come,' he added. And he did not hear his voice; that, too, was imperceptible. 'What should I do now?' he asked the four walls of his room.

There was no response. Kongrosian was completely alone; he no longer had any contact with other life.

I've got to get out of here, he decided. Seek help -- I'm not getting any help, here; they've been unable to arrest the illness-process.

I'll *go back to Jenner.*

See my son.

There was no point in seeking out Dr Superb or any other medical man, chemically-oriented or not. The period of seeking therapy was over. And now -- a new period. What did it consist of? He did not know, yet. In time he would know, however. Assuming that he lived through it. And how could he do that when, for all intents, he was already dead? 'That's it, he said to himself. I've died. And yet I'm still alive.

It was a mystery. He did not understand it.

Perhaps, he thought, what I must seek then is a rebirth.

Effortlessly -- after all, no one could see him -- he made his way from his room and down the corridor to the stairs, down the stairs and out the side entrance of Franklin Aimes Hospital. Presently he was walking along the sidewalk of an unfamiliar street, somewhere in a hilly section of San Francisco, surrounded by vastly high apartment buildings, many of them dating from before World War Three.

By avoiding stepping on any cracks of cement pavement he cancelled, for the time being, the trail of noxious odour which otherwise he would have left in his wake.

I must be getting better, he decided. I've found at least a temporary ritual of purification to balance my phobic body odour. And except for the fact that he was still invisible. How am I going to play the piano this way? he asked himself. This means, evidently, the end of my career.

And then all at once he remembered Merrill Judd, the chemist with A.G. Chemie. Judd was supposed to be going to help me, he recalled; I completely forgot about it, in the excitement of becoming invisible.

I can go by auto-cab to A.G. Chemie.

He hailed an auto-cab which was passing, but it failed to see him. Disappointed, he watched it go on by. I thought I was still visible to

purely electronic scanning devices, he thought. Evidently not, however.

Can I walk to an A.G. Chemie branch? he asked himself.

I guess I'll have to. Because of course I can't board the ordinary pubtrans; it wouldn't be fair to the others.

I've got quite a task for Judd, he realized. Not only must the man eradicate my phobic body odour but he has to make me invisible once more. Discouragement filled Kongrosian's mind. They can't do it, he realized. It's too much; it's hopeless. I'll just have to keep on trying for rebirth.

When I see Judd I'll ask him about it, see what A.G. Chemie can do for me in that line. After all, next to Karp they're the most powerful economic syndrome in the entire USEA. I'd have to go back to the USSR to find a greater economic entity.

A.G. Chemie is so proud of its chemical therapy; let's see if they have a drug which promotes rebirth.

He was walking along, thinking those thoughts while avoiding stepping on the cracks in the pavement, when all at once he realized that something lay in his path. An animal, flat, platter-shaped, orange with black spots, its antennae waving. And, at the same instant, a thought formed in his brain.

'Rebirth ... yes, a new life. Begin over, on another world.'

Mars!

Kongrosian halted and said, 'You're right.' It was a papoola, there on the sidewalk before him. He looked around and saw, sure enough, a jalopy jungle parked not far off, the shiny jalopies sparkling in the sunlight. There, in the centre of the lot, in a little office building, sat the operator of the lot, and Kongrosian moved step by step towards him. The papoola followed, and as it followed it communicated with him.

'Forget A.G. Chemie ... they can't do anything for you.'

Right, Kongrosian thought. It's entirely too late for that.

If Judd had come up with something right away it would have been different. But now. And then he realized something.

The papoola could see him.

Or at least it could sense him with some organ or apperception, in some dimension or other. And -- it did not object to his smell.

'Not at all,' the papoola was telling him. 'You smell perfectly wonderful to me. I have no complaints at all, absolutely none.'

Kongrosian halting, said, 'Would it be that way on Mars? They could see me -- or at least perceive me -- and I wouldn't offend them?'

'There are no Theodoras Nitz commercials on Mars,' the papoola's thoughts came to him, forming in his eager mind.

'You will gradually shed your contamination, there. In that pure,

virgin environment. Enter the office, Mr Kongrosian, and speak to Mr Miller, our sales representative. He is eager to serve you. He exists to serve you.'

'Yes,' Kongrosian said, and opened the door of the office.

There was, ahead of him, another customer waiting; the salesman was filling out a contract form. A thin, tall, balding customer who looked ill-at-ease and restless; he glanced towards Kongrosian and then moved a step away.

The smell had offended him.

'Forgive me,' Kongrosian mumbled in apology.

'Now, Mr Strikerock,' the salesman was saying to this previous customer, 'if you'll sign here -- ' He turned the form around and held up a fountain pen.

The customer, in a spasm of muscular activity, signed, then stepped back, visibly shaking from the tension.

'It's a big moment,' he said to Kongrosian. 'When you decide to do this. I'd never have had the courage on my own, but my psychiatrist suggested it. Said it was the best alternative for me.'

'Who's your psychiatrist?' Kongrosian said, naturally interested.

'There's only one. These days. Dr Egon Superb.'

'He's mine, too,' Kongrosian exclaimed. 'A darn good man; I was just talking to him.'

The customer now studied Kongrosian's face intently.

He said then very painstakingly and slowly, 'You're the man on the telephone. You called Dr Superb; I was in his office.'

The salesman for the jalopy jungle spoke up. 'Mr Strikerock, if you want to step outside with me I'll go over the handling instructions with you, just to be on the safe side. And you can pick out whichever jalopy you want.' To Kongrosian he said, 'I'll be able to help you in just a moment Please be patient, if you will.'

Kongrosian stammered, 'C-can you see me?'

'I can see everybody,' the salesman said. 'Given tune enough.' And he left the office with Strikerock, then.

'Calm yourself,' the papoola said, within Kongrosian's mind; it had remained in the office, evidently to keep him company. 'All is well. Mr Miller will take good care of you and very, very sooooon.' It crooned to him, lulling him.

'Alll is wellllll,' it intoned.

Suddenly the customer, Mr Strikerock, re-entered the office. To Kongrosian he said, 'Now I remember who you are! You're the famous concert pianist who's always playing for Nicole at the White House; you're Richard Kongrosian.'

'Yes,' Kongrosian admitted, pleased to be recognized.

Just to be on the safe side, however, he moved carefully back

from Strikerock, so as not to offend him. ‘I'm amazed,' he said, ‘that you can see me; just recently I've become invisible ... in fact that's what I was discussing with Egon Superb on the phone. Currently, I'm seeking rebirth. That's why I'm going to emigrate; there's no hope for me here on Earth, obviously.'

‘I know how you feel,' Strikerock said, nodding. ‘Just recently I quit my job; I've got no ties to anyone here, any more, not to my brother nor to -- ‘ He paused, his face dark.

‘To anyone. I'm leaving alone, with no one.'

‘Listen,' Kongrosian said, on impulse, ‘Why don't we emigrate together? Or -- does my phobic body odours offend you too much?'

Strikerock did not seem to know what he meant. ‘Emigrate together? You mean go in for a land-stake as partners?'

‘I have plenty of money,' Kongrosian said. ‘From my concert appearances; I can finance both of us easily.' Money was certainly the least of his worries. And maybe he could help this Mr Strikerock, who, after all, had just quit his job.

‘Maybe we could work something out,' Strikerock said thoughtfully, nodding slowly up and down. ‘It's going to be lonely as hell on Mars; we wouldn't have any neighbours except perhaps simulacra. And I've seen enough of them as it is to last me the rest of my life.'

The salesman, Mr Miller, returned to the office, looking a trifle perturbed.

‘We need only one jalopy between us,' Strikerock said to him. ‘Kongrosian and I are emigrating together, as partners.'

Shrugging philosophically, Mr Miller said, ‘I'll show you two a slightly larger model, then. A family-sized model.' He held the door of the office open and Kongrosian and Chic Strikerock stepped out on to the lot. ‘You two know each other?' he asked.

‘Not before now,' Strikerock said. ‘But we both have the same problem; we're invisible, here on Earth. So to speak.'

‘That's right,' Kongrosian put in. I've become totally invisible to the human eye; obviously it's time to emigrate.'

‘Yes, if that's the case I would say so,' Mr Miller agreed tartly.

The man on the telephone said, ‘My name is Merrill Judd, of A.G. Chemie. I'm sorry to bother you -- ‘

‘Go ahead,' Janet Raimer said, seating herself at her neat, small idiosyncratically-arranged desk. She nodded to her secretary, who at once shut the office door, cutting out the noises from the White House corridor outside. ‘You say this has to do with Richard Kongrosian.'

‘That's right.' On the screen, Merrill Judd's miniature face image nodded. ‘And for that reason it occurred to me to contact you, because of the close ties between Kongrosian and the White House. It seemed

reasonable to me that you'd want to know. I tried, about half an hour ago, to visit Kongrosian at Franklin Aimes Neuropsychiatric Hospital in San Francisco. He was gone. The staff there couldn't locate him.'

'I see,' Janet Raimer said.

'Evidently he's quite ill. From what he said to me -- '

'Yes,' Janet said, 'he's quite ill. Do you have any other information for us? If not, I'd like to get started on this right away.'

The A.G. Chemie psych-chemist had no other information. He rang off, and Janet dialled an inside line, trying several White House stations until at last she managed to reach her nominal superior, Harold Slezak.

'Kongrosian has left the hospital and vanished. God knows where he may have gone, possibly back to Jenner we should check that, of course. Frankly, I think the NP should be brought in; Kongrosian is vital.'

' "Vital," ' Slezak echoed, wrinkling his nose. 'Well, let's say rather that we like him. We'd prefer not to have to make do without him. I'll obtain Nicole's permission to involve the police; I think you're right in your estimate of the situation.' Slezak , with no amities, rang off then. Janet hung up the phone.

She had done all she could do; it was now out of her hands.

The next thing she knew, an NP man was in her office, notebook in hand. Wilder Pembroke -- she had run into him many times when he held lesser positions -- seated himself across from her and began to take notes. 'I've already checked with Franklin Aimes.' The Commissioner regarded her thoughtfully. 'It seems that Kongrosian made a phone call to Dr Egon Superb -- you know who he is: the sole remaining psychoanalyst. He left not much after that. To your knowledge, was Kongrosian seeing Superb?'

'Yes of course,' Janet said. 'For some time.'

'Where do you think he would go?'

'Except for Jenner -- '

'He's not there. We've got somebody in the area, now.'

'Then I don't know, Ask Superb.'

'We're doing that,' Pembroke said.

She laughed. 'Maybe he's joined Bertold Goltz.'

The Commissioner, not amused, his flat face hard, said, 'We'll look into that of course. And there's always the possibility he ran into one of those Loony Luke lots, those fly-by-night jalopy jungles. They seem somehow to show up at the appropriate time and place. God knows how they manage it but they do, somehow. Of all the possibilities -- ' Pembroke was speaking half to himself; he seemed quite agitated. 'As far as I'm concerned that's the very worst.'

'Kongrosian would never go to Mars,' Janet said.

‘There's no market for his talents, there; they don't need concert pianists. And underneath his eccentric, artistic exterior, Richard is shrewd. He would be aware of that.'

‘Maybe he's given up playing,' Pembroke said. ‘For something better.'

‘I wonder what sort of farmer a psychokinetic would make.'

Pembroke said, ‘Maybe that's exactly what Kongrosian is wondering at this moment, too.'

‘I -- would think he'd want to take his wife and son.'

‘Perhaps not. Maybe that's the entire point. Have you seen the boy? The offspring? Do you know about the Jenner area and what's happened, there?'

‘Yes,' she said tightly.

‘Then you understand.'

They were both silent.

Ian Duncan was just seating himself in the comfortable leather-covered chair across from Dr Egon Superb when the squad of NP men burst into the office.

‘You'll have to disburse your healing a little later,' the young, sharp-chinned NP squad leader said as he briefly showed Dr Superb his credentials. ‘Richard Kongrosian has disappeared from Franklin Aimes and we are trying to locate him. Has he contacted you?'

‘Not since leaving the hospital,' Dr Superb said. ‘He called me earlier while he was still -- ‘

‘We know about that.' The NP man eyed Superb. ‘What do you think are the chances that Kongrosian has joined the Sons of Job?'

Superb said at once, ‘None whatsoever.'

‘All right.' The NP man noted that. ‘In your opinion, is there any chance he might have approached the Loony Luke people? Emigrated, or be attempting to emigrate, by means of a jalopy?'

After a long pause Dr Superb said, ‘I think the chances are excellent. He needs -- seeks perpetually -- isolation.'

The NP leader closed his notebook, turned to his squad and said, ‘Then that's it. The lots will have to be closed.'

Into his portable corn-system he said, ‘Dr Superb concurs with the lot idea but not with the Sons of Job. I think we should go along with him; the doctor seems to be certain. Check at once in the San Francisco area, see if a lot has shown up there. Thanks.' He rang off, then said to Dr Superb, ‘We appreciate your help. If he does contact you, notify us.' He laid his card on Dr Superb's desk.

‘Don't -- be rough on him,' Dr Superb said. ‘If you do find him. He's very, very ill.'

The NP man glanced at him, smiled slightly, and then the squad of them left the office; the door shut after them. Ian Duncan and Dr

Superb were again alone.

In a peculiar, hoarse voice Ian Duncan said, ‘I'll have to consult with you some other time.' He rose unsteadily to his feet. ‘Goodbye.'

‘What's wrong?' Dr Superb said, also rising.

‘I've got to go.'

Ian Duncan plucked at the door, managed to open it, disappeared; the door slammed.

Strange, Dr Superb thought. The man -- Duncan, was it? -- didn't even have an opportunity to begin discussing his problem with me. Why did the appearance of the NP upset him so? Pondering, but finding no answer, Dr Superb reseated himself and buzzed Amanda Conners to send in the next patient; a whole waiting room full of them waited outside, the men surreptitiously (and many of the women, too) watching Amanda and every move she made.

‘Yes, doctor,' Amanda's sweet voice came, cheering up Dr Superb more than a little.

As soon as he was out of the doctor's office Ian Duncan searched frantically for an auto-cab. Al was here in San Francisco; he knew that. Al had given him a schedule of the Number Three Lot's pattern of appearances. They would get Al. It was the end of Duncan & Miller, Classic Jugs.

A sleek, modern auto-cab called to him, ‘KinIhelpya, fella?'

‘Yes,' Ian Duncan gasped, and started out into traffic to meet it.

This gives me a chance, he said to himself as the auto-cab streaked for the destination he had given it. But they'll get there first. Or will they? The police would have to comb virtually the entire city, and block by block; whereas he knew and was heading for, the exact spot where Lot Number Three could be found. So perhaps he had a chance -- a slim one -- after all.

If they get you, Al, he said to himself, *it's the end of me, too.*

I can't go on alone. I'll join Goltz or die, something dreadful like that. It doesn't matter what.

The auto-cab hurtled across town, on its way to Loony Luke's Jalopy Jungle Number Three.

11

Nat Flieger wondered, idly, if the chuppers had any ethnic music. EME was, in its impartial way, always interested. But still, that was not their task, here; ahead now lay the home of Richard Kongrosian, a pale green wooden frame building, three storey, with -- incredibly -- an ancient, brown, untrimmed, ragged palm tree growing in the front yard.

'We've arrived.' Molly murmured.

The antique auto-cab slowed, gave forth a grating, indecisive racket, and then shut itself entirely off. It coasted to a stop and then there was silence. Nat listened to the far-off wind moving through the trees, and the faint spattering rhythm of the mist-like rain as it fell everywhere, on the cab and the foliage, the unkempt old wooden house with its tarpapered sun deck and many small, square windows, several of which were broken.

Jim Planck lit a Corina *corona* and said, 'No signs of life.'

It was true. So evidently Goltz had been correct.

'I think,' Molly said presently, 'we've come on a wild goose chase.' She opened the door of the auto-cab and hopped gingerly out. The soil, under her feet, sank squashily. She made a face.

'The chuppers,' Nat said. 'We can always record the music of the chuppers. If they have any.' He too, climbed out; he stood beside Molly and they both gazed at the big old house, neither of them speaking.

It was a melancholy scene; no doubt of that. Hands in his pockets, Nat walked towards the house. He came up on to a gravel path which passed between elderly fuchsia and camellia bushes. Presently Molly followed. Jim Planck remained in the car.

'Let's get it over with and then let's get out of here,' Molly said, and shivered, terribly cold in her bright cotton blouse and shorts.

Nat put his arm around her.

'What's that for?' she demanded.

'Nothing in particular. I just felt fond of you, all of a sudden. I'd be fond of anything, right now, that wasn't damp and squishy.' He hugged her briefly. 'Don't I make you feel a little better?'

'No.' Molly said. 'Or maybe yes; I don't know.' She sounded irritable. 'Go on up on to the porch, for chrissakes, and knock!' Pulling away from him she gave him a push forward.

Nat ascended the sagging wooden steps, on to the porch, and rang the doorbell.

'I feel sick,' Molly said. 'Why is that?'

'The humidity.' Nat found it overwhelming, oppressive; he could

hardly breathe. He wondered what the weather would do to the Ganymedean life form which was his recording apparatus; it liked moisture and so perhaps it would flourish, here. Perhaps the Ampek F-a2 could even live here on its own, survive in the rain forest indefinitely. This environment, he realized, is more alien to us than Mars would be. It was a sobering thought Mars and Tijuana ... closer than Jenner and Tijuana. Ecologically speaking.

The door opened. A woman wearing a pale yellow smock faced him, stood blocking the entrance and regarding him quietly, her brown eyes calm but oddly wary.

'Mrs. Kongrosian?' he said. Beth Kongrosian was not bad looking. Her hair, tied back with a ribbon, was light brown, long; she might have been in her late twenties or early thirties. In any case she was slender and she stood well. He found himself studying her with respect and interest.

'You're from the recording studio?' Her voice, low, had a toneless quality, a peculiar lack of affect. 'Mr Dondoldo phoned and said you were on your way. It's a shame. You can come inside if you want, but Richard isn't here.' She held the door wide, then. 'Richard is in the hospital, down in San Francisco.'

Christ, he thought. What lousy, miserable luck. He turned to Molly and they exchanged glances mutely.

'Please come in,' Beth Kongrosian said. 'Let me fix you coffee or dinner or something before you turn around and start back; it's such a long way.'

Nat said to Molly, 'Go back and tell Jim. I'd like to take Mrs Kongrosian up on her offer; I could use a cup of coffee.'

Turning, Molly started back down the steps.

'You look tired,' Beth Kongrosian said. 'Are you Mr Flieger? I wrote the name down; Mr Dondoldo gave it to me. I know Richard would have been glad to record for you, if he were here; that's why it's all such a shame.' She led him into the living room. It was dark and cool, crowded with wicker furniture, but at least dry. 'A drink,' she said. 'What about gin and tonic? Or I have Scotch. What about Scotch on the rocks?'

'Just coffee,' Nat said. 'Thanks.' He inspected a photograph on the wall; it showed him a scene in which a man swung a small baby on a tall metal swing. 'Is this your son?'

The woman, however, had gone.

He looked closer. The baby in the photograph had the chupper jaw.

Behind him, Molly and Jim Planck appeared. He waved them over, and they both examined the picture.

'Music,' Nat said. 'I wonder if they have any music.'

‘They can't sing,' Molly said. ‘How could they sing if they can't talk?' She walked away from the picture and stood with her arms folded, looking through the living room window at the palm tree outside. ‘What an ugly tree.' She turned to Nat. ‘Don't you agree?'

‘I think,' he said, ‘that there's room in the world for life of every kind.'

Jim Planck said quietly, ‘I agree.'

Returning to the living room, Beth Kongrosian said to Jim Planck and Molly, ‘What would you two like? Coffee? A drink? Something to eat?'

They conferred.

At his office in the Administration Building of Karp u. Sohnen Werke, Detroit Branch, Vince Strikerock received a phone call from his wife -- or rather his ex-wife -- Julie. Now Julie Applequist again, as she had been when he first met her. Looking lovely but worried and wildly distracted, Julie said, ‘Vince, that goddam brother of yours *he's gone.'* Wide-eyed, she gazed at him beseechingly. ‘I don't know what to do.'

He said in a deliberate, calming voice, ‘Gone where, Julie?'

‘I think -- ‘ She choked over the words. ‘Vince, he left me to emigrate; we talked about emigrating and I didn't want to, and I know he's gone ahead alone. He was determined to; I realize that now. I just didn't take it seriously enough.' Tears filled her eyes.

Behind Vince, his superior appeared. ‘Herr Anton Karp wants to see you in Suite Four. As soon as possible.' He glared at the screen, recognizing this as a personal call.

‘Julie,' Vince said clumsily, ‘I have to get off the line.'

‘Okay,' she said, nodding. ‘But do something for me. Find Chic. Won't you please? I'll never ask you for anything else again. I promise. I just have to have him back.'

I knew it wouldn't work out between you two, Vince said to himself. He experienced grim relish. Too bad, dear, he thought. Tough! You made a mistake; I know Chic and I know that women like you petrify him. You scared him into running, and he'll never stop or look back, now that he's begun. Because it's a one-way trip.

Aloud, he said, ‘I'll do what I can.'

‘Thanks, Vince,' she breathed tearfully. ‘Even if I don't actively love you any more I still -- ‘

‘Goodbye,' he said, and rang off.

A moment later he was ascending by elevator to Suite Four.

As soon as Anton Karp spied him Karp said, ‘Herr Strikerock, I understand that your brother is employed by a miserably tiny firm by the name of Frauenzimmer Associates. Is that correct?' Karp's heavy, sombre face was twisted with tension.

‘Yes,' Vince said slowly, with great caution. ‘But -- ‘ He hesitated. Obviously if Chic was emigrating he would be leaving his job; he could hardly take it with him.

What did Karp want? Better be on the safe side and not say anything unnecessary. ‘But, um ... ‘

Karp said, ‘Can he get you in there?'

Blinking, Vince said, ‘Y-you mean on the premises? As a visitor? Or do you mean -- ‘ He could feel apprehension mounting inside him as the cold blue eyes of the middleaged German ersatz industrialist bored into him. ‘I don't quite understand, Herr Karp,' he mumbled.

‘Today,' Karp said in a brisk, harsh staccato, ‘the government let the simulacrum contract to Herr Frauenzimmer. We have studied the situation and our response is dictated by circumstances themselves. Because of this order, Frauenzimmer will expand; he will take on new employees. I want you, through your brother, to go to work for them, as soon as you can arrange it. Possibly today.'

Vince stared at him.

‘What's the matter?' Karp said.

‘I'm -- surprised,' Vince managed to say.

‘As soon as Frauenzimmer's taken you on, inform me direct; don't talk to anyone else but me.' Karp paced about the large carpeted room, scratching his nose vigorously.

‘We'll tell you what to do next. That's all for now, Herr Strikerock.'

‘Does it matter what I do there?' Vince asked weakly. ‘I mean, is it important exactly what my job is?'

‘No,' Karp said.

Vince left the suite; the door at once slid shut after him.

He stood alone in the corridor, trying to reassemble his scattered, disorganized faculties. My god, he thought. They want me to throw my sabots into Frauenzimmer's assembly line; I know it. Sabotage or spying, one or the other; anyhow something illegal, something that'll bring the NP down on me -- me, not the Karps.

My own brother's outfit, too, he said to himself.

He felt utterly impotent. They could make him do anything they wanted; all the Karps had to do was lift their little finger.

And I'll give in, he realized.

He returned to his own office, shakily seated himself with the door shut; alone, he sat silently at his desk, smoking an ersatz-tobacco cigar and pondering. His hands, he discovered, were numb.

I've got to get out of here, he told himself. *I'm not going to be a petty, minuscule, cipher-type minion for the Karp Werke -- it'll kill me.*

He crushed his non-tobacco cigar out.

Where can I go? He asked himself.

Where? I need help.

Who can I get it from? There was that doctor. That he and Chic had been going to see.

Picking up the phone he signalled Karp's switchboard operator. 'Get me Dr Egon Superb,' he instructed her, 'that one analyst that's left.'

After that he sat miserably at his desk, the phone against his ear. Waiting.

Nicole Thibodeaux thought, I've got too much to do. I'm attempting to conduct delicate, tricky negotiations with Hermann Goering, I've instructed Garth McRae to let the new der Alte contract to a small firm and not to Karp, I have to decide what to do if Richard Kongrosian is ever found again, there's the McPhearson Act and that last analyst, Dr Superb, and now this. Now the NP's hasty decision -- made without even attempting to consult me or notify me in advance -- to move in on Loony Luke's jalopy lots in dead earnest.

Unhappily, she studied the police order which had gone out to every NP unit throughout the USEA.

This isn't in our interest, she decided. I can't afford to attack Luke because I simply can't get at him. We'll only look absurd.

And -- we'll look like a totalitarian society. Kept in existence only by our enormous military and police establishments.

Glancing up swiftly at Wilder Pembroke, Nicole said, 'Have you actually found the lot, yet? The one in San Francisco where you can imagine -- merely imagine -- Richard is?'

'No. We haven't found it yet.' Pembroke mopped his forehead nervously; quite clearly he was under heavy strain.

'If there had been time of course I would have consulted you. But once he takes off for Mars -- '

'Better to lose him than to move prematurely against Luke!' She had a good deal of respect for Luke; she had known him, and his operations, for a good long time. She had seen him easily evade the City Police.

'I have an interesting report from the Karp Werke.' Obviously Pembroke was now desperately trying to switch the topic under discussion. 'They've decided to penetrate the Frauenzimmer organization in order to -- '

'Later.' Nicole scowled at him. 'You know now you've made a mistake. Really, down underneath, I enjoy those jalopy jungles; they're amusing. You simply can't fathom that; you've got a cop's mind. Call your San Francisco unit and tell them to release the lot if they've found it. And if they haven't found it, tell them to give up. Bring them back in and forget about it; when the time arrives to proceed against Luke *I'll tell you.'*

‘Harold Slezak agreed -- ‘

‘Slezak doesn't make policy. I'm surprised you didn't get Rudi Kalbfleisch's approval on this. That would have been even more like you NP people. I really don't like you, I find you unsavoury.' She stared at him until he shrank back.

‘Well?' she said. ‘Say something.'

With dignity, Pembroke said, ‘They haven't found the lot, so no harm has been done.' He flicked on his com system.

‘Give up on the lots,' he said into it. At this moment he did not look very imposing; he was still perspiring freely.

‘Forget the whole damn thing. Yes, that's right.' He clicked the system off and raised his head to face Nicole.

‘You should be busted,' Nicole said.

‘Anything else, Mrs Thibodeaux?' Pembroke's voice was wooden.

‘No. Scram.'

Pembroke with measured, stiff steps, departed.

Looking at her wristwatch, Nicole saw that the time was eight P.M. And what had been planned for this evening? Shortly she would be going on TV with another Visit to the White House, the seventy-fifth of the year. Had Janet lined up anything and if so had Slezak managed to bumble through to an adequate schedule? Probably not.

She walked through the White House to Janet Raimer's tidy office. ‘Do you have anything spectacular coming along?' she demanded.

Rattling her notes, Janet frowned and said. ‘One act I'd call truly astonishing -- a jug act. Classical. Duncan & Miller; I watched them at The Abraham Lincoln and they're terrific.' She smiled hopefully.

Nicole groaned.

‘They really are quite good.' Janet's voice was insistent, now. Commanding. ‘It's relaxing: I'd like you to please give it a try. That's either for tonight or tomorrow, I'm not certain which Slezak scheduled it for.'

‘Jug acts,' Nicole said. ‘We've gone from Richard Kongrosian to that. I'm beginning to think we should let Bertold Goltz take over. And to think that in the Days of Barbarism they had Kirsten Flagstad to entertain them.'

‘Maybe things will pick up when the next der Alte takes office,' Janet said.

Regarding her keenly, Nicole said, ‘How is it that you know about that?'

‘Everybody in the White House is talking about it. Anyhow,' Janet Raimer bristled, ‘I'm a *Ge.'*

‘How wonderful,' Nicole said sardonically. ‘Then you must lead a truly delightful life.'

‘May I ask what this next der Alte will be like?'

‘Old,' Nicole said. Old and tired, she thought to herself. A worn-out stringbean, stiff and formal, full of moralizing speeches; a real leader type who can drum obedience into the *Be* masses. Who can keep the system creaking along a while longer. And, according to the von Lessinger technicians *he will be the final der Alte.*

At least, most likely.

And they are not certain quite why. We seem to have a chance but it is a small one. Time, and the dialectic forces of history are on the side of -- the worst creature possible. That vulgar buttinski, Bertold Goltz.

However, the future was not fixed and there was always room for the unexpected, the improbable; everyone who had handled von Lessinger equipment understood that ... time travel was still merely an art, not an exact science.

‘He will be called,' Nicole said, ‘Dieter Hogben.'

Janet giggled. ‘Oh no, not actually "Dieter Hogben", or is it "Hogbein"? What in the world are you trying to achieve?'

‘He will be very dignified,' Nicole said stiffly.

There was a sudden noise behind her; she turned and found herself facing Wilder Pembroke, the NP man. Pembroke looked agitated but pleased. ‘Mrs Thibodeaux, we've caught Richard Kongrosian. As Dr Superb predicted, he was at a jalopy jungle preparing to depart for Mars. Shall we bring him to the White House? The San Francisco squad is waiting for instructions; they're still at the lot.'

‘I'll go there,' Nicole decided, on impulse. And ask him, she said to herself, to give up the idea of emigrating. Voluntarily. I know I can persuade him -- we won't have to resort to blunt force.'

‘He says he's invisible,' Pembroke said, as he and Nicole hurried along the White House corridor towards the offtrans field on the roof. ‘The squad however says he appears perfectly visible, at least to them.'

‘Another of his delusions,' Nicole said. ‘We ought to be able to clear that right up; I'll tell him he's visible and that will be that.'

‘And his smell -- ‘

‘Oh, the hell with it,' Nicole said. ‘I'm tired of his ailments. I'm tired of having him pamper himself in his hypochondriacal obsessions. I'm going to toss the entire power and majesty and authority of the state at him, tell him pointblank that he's *got* to give his imaginary diseases up.'

‘I wonder what that will do to him,' Pembroke mused.

‘He'll comply, of course,' Nicole said. ‘He won't have any choice; that's the whole point -- I'm not asking him, I'm going to *tell* him.'

Pembroke glanced at her, then shrugged.

‘We've fooled around with this too long,' Nicole said.

‘Smell or not, invisible or not, Kongrosian is an employee of the White House; he's got to appear on schedule and perform, or else. He can't sneak away to Mars or Franklin Aimes or Jenner or anywhere else.'

‘Yes ma'am,' Pembroke said hollowly, preoccupied with his own convoluted thoughts.

When Ian Duncan reached Jalopy Jungle Number Three in downtown San Francisco he found that he was too late to warn Al. Because the NP had already arrived; he saw parked police cars and grey-clad NP men swarming over the lot.

‘Let me out here,' he instructed his auto-cab. He was a block away from the lot; that was close enough.

He paid the cab and then set out, warily, on foot. A small knot of curious passers-by with nothing else to do had formed, and Ian Duncan joined them, rubber-necking at the NP men, pretending to wonder why they were there.

‘What's up?' the man next to Ian asked him. ‘I thought they weren't going to crack down on these jalopy lots yet. I thought -- ‘

‘Must be a change in govpol,' the woman on Ian's left said.

‘ "Govpol," ‘ the man echoed, puzzled.

‘A *Ge* term,' the woman said haughtily. ‘Government policy.'

‘Oh,' the man said. He nodded meekly.

Ian said to him, ‘Now you know a *Ge* term.'

‘That's so.' The man perked up. ‘So I do.'

‘I knew a *Ge* term, once,' Ian said. He caught sight now of Al, inside the office, seated facing two NP men. Another man was with Al; in fact two other men. One, Ian decided was Richard Kongrosian. The other -- he recognized him; it was a fellow-inhabitant of The Abraham Lincoln Apartments, Mr Chic Strikerock from the top floor. Ian had run into him a number of times at meetings and in the cafeteria.

His brother Vince was currently their identification reader.

‘The term I knew,' he murmured, ‘was *allost.'*

‘What's "allost" mean?" the man beside him asked.

‘All's lost,' Ian said.

The term applied right now. Obviously, Al was under arrest; so in fact were Strikerock and Kongrosian, but Ian did not care about them -- he was thinking about Duncan & Miller, Classical Jugs; about the future which had opened up when Al had decided to play once more; the future which now had closed so decisively in their faces. I should have expected this, Ian said to himself. That just before we got to the White House the NP would step in and arrest Al, put an end to it all. It's the luck that's tracked me all my life. No reason why it should relent now.

If they've got Al, he decided, they might as well have me, too. Pushing through the knot of onlookers, Ian stepped up on to the lot and approached the nearest NP man.

'Move on,' the grey-clad NP man said to him, motioning.

'Take me,' Ian said. 'I'm in on it.'

The NP man glared at him. 'I said get going.'

Ian Duncan kicked the NP man in the groin.

With a curse the NP man groped in his coat, whipped out his pistol. 'Damn you, you're under arrest!' His face had turned green.

'What's going on here?' another NP man, higher in rank, demanded, walking up.

'This jerk just kicked me in the crotch,' the first NP man said, holding his gun pointed at Ian Duncan and trying to keep from being ill.

'You're under arrest,' the higher-in-rank NP man informed Ian.

'I know,' Ian said, nodding. 'I want to be. But eventually this tyranny will fall.'

'What tyranny, you jerk?' the higher-in-rank NP man said. 'Obviously you're confused. You'll cool off in jail.'

From the office in the centre of the lot Al appeared; he walked over sombrely. 'What are you doing here?' he asked Ian. He did not look very pleased to see him.

Ian said, 'I'm going along with you and Mr Kongrosian and Chic Strikerock. I'm not going to be left behind. There's nothing here for me, now.'

Opening his mouth, Al started to say something. But then a government ship, a gleaming silver and yellow offtrans vehicle, appeared overhead and began, with a tremendous series of noises, carefully to land. The NP men at once cleared everyone back; Ian found himself herded along with Al, over to a corner of the lot, still under the dark scrutiny of the first NP man, the one whom he had kicked in the groin, the one who now had it in for him.

The offtrans ship landed and from it stepped a young woman. It was Nicole Thibodeaux. And she was beautiful slim and beautiful. Luke had been wrong or lying. Ian gaped at her, and, beside him, Al grunted in surprise and said under his breath, 'How come? I'll be darned; what's she doing here?'

Accompanied by an NP man of evidently colossal rank, Nicole bobbed across the lot to the office, she hurried up the steps, entered and approached Richard Kongrosian.

'It's him she wants,' Al said in an aside to Ian Duncan. The piano player. That's what all this is about.' He got out an Algerian briar pipe and a pouch of Sail tobacco. 'Can I smoke?' he asked their NP guard.

'No,' the NP man said.

Putting his pipe and tobacco away, Al said wonderingly, ‘Imagine her coming here to Jalopy Jungle Number Three. I never would have figured on that.' Suddenly he grabbed Ian by the shoulder and squeezed violently. ‘I'm going over to her and introduce myself.' Before their NP guard could say anything Al started off at a trot; he threaded his way among the parked jalopies and in a split second he had vanished.

The NP man cursed impotently and prodded Ian with his gun. A moment later Al reappeared, at the entrance to the small office building in which Nicole stood talking to Richard Kongrosian. Al opened the door and pushed inside.

Richard Kongrosian was saying as Al opened the office door, ‘But I can't play for you; I smell too bad! You're far too close to me -- please, Nicole, dear, stand back, for chrissakes!' Kongrosian retreated from Nicole, glanced up and saw Al, and said appealingly, ‘Why did you take so long demonstrating that jalopy? Why couldn't we just have taken right off?'

‘Sorry,' Al said. To Nicole he said, ‘I'm Al Miller. I operate this lot.' He held out his hand to her. She ignored the hand, but she was looking his way. ‘Mrs Thibodeaux,' Al said, ‘let the guy go. Don't stop him. He has a right to emigrate if he wants. Don't make people into wooden slaves.'

That was all he could think of to say; it spilled out and then he was silent. His heart laboured. How wrong Luke had been. She was as beautiful as he could possibly imagine; it confirmed everything he had seen before in his original brief one-time glimpse from a distance.

Nicole said to him, ‘This is not your business.'

‘Yes, it is,' Al said. ‘Literally. This man is my customer.'

Now Chick Strikerock found his voice. ‘Mrs Thibodeaux, it's an honour, an incredible honour, to -- ‘ His voice wavered; he gulped air, trembled. And he could not continue. He backed away from her, frozen into silence, as if he had been turned off. Al felt disgusted.

‘I'm a sick man,' Kongrosian mumbled.

‘Bring Richard along,' Nicole said to the high NP official who stood beside her. ‘We're returning to the White House.'

To Al she said, ‘Your little lot can remain open; we're not interested in you one way or another. Some other tune, perhaps ... ‘ She eyed him, without malice, and, as she had said, without interest.

‘Stand aside,' the high-ranking grey-uniformed NP official ordered Al. ‘We're going out.' He shoved past Al, leading Kongrosian by the arm, businesslike and tough.

Nicole followed slightly after the two of them, her hands in the pockets of her long leopard-skin coat. She seemed pensive now, and had become silent. Withdrawn into her moody thoughts.

'I'm a sick man,' Kongrosian mumbled once more.

To Nicole, Al said, 'Can I have your autograph?' It was an impulse, a whim from the unconscious. Pointless and futile.

'What?' She glanced at him, startled. And then she showed her even white teeth in a laugh. 'My god,' she said, and then passed on out of the office after the high-ranking NP official and Richard Kongrosian. Al was left behind with Chic Strikerock, who was still trying to find words by which to express himself.

'I guess I don't get her autograph,' Al said to Strikerock.

'W-what do you think of her?' Strikerock stammered.

'Lovely,' Al said.

'Yes,' Strikerock said. 'It's incredible; I never expected ever to actually see her, you know, in real life, actually. It's like a miracle, don't you agree?' He crossed to the window to peer after Nicole as she and Kongrosian and the NP bigwig moved towards the parked offtrans ship.

'It would be easy as hell,' Al said, 'to fall in love with that woman.' He, too, watched her depart. So did everyone else, including the squad of NP men. Far too easy, he thought.

And -- he would be seeing her again, presently he -- and Ian, too -- would be playing their jugs before her. Had that changed? No. Nicole had specifically said that no one was under arrest; she had countermanded the NP's order. He was free to keep the lot open. The NP would be leaving after all.

Al lit his pipe.

Coming up beside him, Ian Duncan said, 'Well, Al, she cost you the sale of a jalopy.' By Nicole's order, the NP had let him go; he, too, was free.

Al said, 'Mr Strikerock will still take it. Won't you, Mr Strikerock?'

After a pause Chic Strikerock said, 'No, I've changed my mind.'

'The power,' Al said, 'of that woman -- ' He cursed, loudly and explicitly. And scatologically.

Chic Strikerock said, 'Thanks anyhow. Maybe I'll see you some other time. Concerning that.'

'You're a fool,' Al said, 'to let that woman scare you out of emigrating.'

'Maybe so,' Chic agreed, nodding.

Obviously it was hopeless to try to reason with him. Al could see that; so could Ian. Nicole had won another convert and she was not even here to enjoy it; she was not even interested. 'Back to your job, is it?' Al said.

'That's right.' Strikerock nodded. Back to the stale routine.'

'You'll never make it here to this lot again,' Al said. 'This is undoubtedly absolutely the last chance you'll ever have to break away

in your entire life.'

'Maybe so,' Chic Strikerock said, nodding morosely. But he did not budge.

'Good luck,' Al said bitingly, and shook hands with him, 'Thanks,' Chic Strikerock said, with no trace of a smile.

'Why?'

Al asked him. 'Can you explain to me why she affected you so?'

'No, I can't,' Strikerock said. 'I just feel it. I don't think it. It's not a logical situation.'

Ian Duncan said to Al, 'And you felt it, too. I watched you. I saw the expression on your face.'

'Okay!' Al said with irritation. 'So what?' He walked away from them and stood by himself, smoking his pipe and gazing out the window of the office at the jalopies parked outside.

I wonder, Chic Strikerock wondered, if Maury will take me back. Maybe it's too late; maybe I burned my bridges too well. At a public phonebooth he dialled Maury Frauenzimmer at the factory. Taking a deep shuddering breath he stood with the receiver pressed to his ear, waiting.

'Chic!' Maury Frauenzimmer yelled, when his image appeared. He beamed, expansive and younger-looking with a radiant, triumphant joy that Chic had never witnessed before. 'Boy, am I glad you finally called! Come on back here, for chrissakes and -- '

'What's happened?' Chic said. 'What's up, Maury?'

'I can't tell you. We got a big order; that's all I can say over the phone. I'm taking on men right and left. I need you back; I need everybody! This is it, Chic, what we've been waiting for all these goddam years!' Maury seemed almost on the verge of tears. 'How soon can you get back here?'

Muddled, Chic answered, 'Very soon. I guess.'

'Also,' Maury said, 'your brother Vince called. Trying to get hold of you. He wants a job. Karp fired him or he quit or something -- anyhow he's looking everywhere for you. He wants to get on here, situation-wise, alongside of you. And I told him if you recommended him -- '

'Oh sure,' Chic said absently, 'Vince is a first-rate ersatz technician. Listen, Maury. What is this order you've got?'

A slow, secretive expression appeared on Maury's wide face. 'I'll tell you when you get here; don't you understand? So hurry!'

Chic said, 'I was going to emigrate.'

'Emigrate, shmemigrate. With this you don't have to, now. We're set up for life; take my word for it -- you, me, your brother, everybody! I'll see you.' Maury abruptly cut the connection at his end; the screen died.

It must be a government contract, Chic said to himself.

And whatever it is, Karp's lost it. That's why Vince is out of a job. And that's why Vince wants to work for Maury; *he knows.*

We're now a *Ge* outfit, Chic said to himself with exultation. We're at last, long last, on the inside.

Thank god, he thought, that I didn't emigrate. I drew back just on the brink, just in the nick of time.

Finally luck, he realized, is with me.

This was absolutely the best -- and most decisive -- day of his life. A day, in fact, which he would never forget as long as he lived. Like his boss Maury Frauenzimmer, he was all at once thoroughly, completely happy.

Later on, he was to look back to this day ...

But he did not know that now.

After all, he did not have access to von Lessinger equipment.

12

Chic Strikerock leaned back against his seat and said expansively, ‘I just don't know, Vince. Maybe I can get you a job with Maury, maybe not.' He was thoroughly enjoying the situation.

They were on their way together, he and Vince, up the autobahn by car, heading towards Frauenzimmer Associates. Their centrally controlled but private vehicle spun along, expertly guided; they had nothing to worry about in that department and it left them free for more important considerations.

‘But you're hiring all sorts of people,' Vince pointed out.

‘I'm not the boss, though,' Chic said.

‘Do what you can,' Vince said. ‘Okay? I really would appreciate it. After all, Karp is going to be methodically ruined, now. That's obvious.' He had a peculiar, miserable, hangdog expression which Chic had never seen before. ‘Of course, anything you say is all right with me,' he murmured.

‘I don't want to put you to any trouble.'

Pondering the matter, Chic said, ‘I think also we should settle this business about Julie. This is as good a time as any.'

His brother's head jerked; Vince stared at him, his face twisting. ‘What do you mean?'

‘Call it a tie-in deal,' Chic said.

After a long pause Vince said wooden, ‘I see.'

‘But' -- Vince shuddered -- ‘I mean, you said yourself -- ‘

‘The most I've ever said is that she makes me nervous. But I feel a lot more psychologically secure, now. After all, I was about to be fired. That's all changed; I'm part of an expanding, growing company. And we both know it. I'm on the inside and that means a lot. Now I think I can handle Julie. In fact I *ought* to have a wife. It helps ensure status.'

‘You mean you intend to formally marry her?'

Chic nodded.

‘All right,' Vince said, at last. ‘Keep her. Frankly I don't give a damn about it. It's your business. Just as long as you get me on at Maury Frauenzimmer's place; that's all I care about.'

Strange, Chic thought. He had never known his brother to be that concerned with his career, to the exclusion of any other topic. He made a mental note of it; perhaps it meant something.

‘I can offer Frauenzimmer a lot,' Vince said. ‘For example, I happen to know the name of the new der Alte. I picked up some scuttlebutt at Karp's, before I left. You want to know it?'

Chic said, ‘What? The new *what?'*

‘The new der Alte. Or don't you understand what this contract is that your boss has got away from Karp?'

Shrugging, Chic said, ‘Sure. I know. I was just startled.'

His ears rang from shock. ‘Listen,' he managed to say, ‘I don't care if it's going to be called Adolf Hitler van Beethoven.' The der Alte; so it was a sim. He felt really good, knowing that. This world, Earth, was a fine place to live in, at long last, and he meant to make the most of it. Now that he was truly a *Ge*.

‘It's name is going to be Dieter Hogben,' Vince said.

‘I'm sure Maury knows what it'll be,' Chic said nonchalantly, but inside he was still nonplussed. Utterly.

Bending, his brother turned on the car radio. ‘There's some news about it already.'

‘I doubt if there would be so soon,' Chic said.

‘Quiet!' His brother turned up the volume. He had a news bulletin. So everyone, throughout the USEA, would be hearing it, now. Chic felt a little disappointed.

‘ ... a mild heart attack which doctors revealed occurred at approximately three A.M. and which has given rise to widely-held fears that Herr Kalbfleisch may not live to serve out his term of office. The condition of der Alte's heart and circulatory system is the subject of speculation, and this unexpected cardiac arrest comes at a time when -- ‘ The radio droned on. Vince and Chic exchanged glances and then suddenly both of them burst into laughter. Knowingly and intimately.

‘It won't be long,' Chic said. The old man was on his way out; the first of a series of public announcements had now been made. The process ran a regular course, easily predictable. First, the mild, initial heart attack, coming out of the blue, thought at first to be merely indigestion, this shocked everyone but at the same time it prepared them, got them used to the idea. The *Bes* had to be approached in this manner; it was a tradition, and it functioned smoothly, effectively. As it had each time before.

Everything's settled, Chic said to himself. The disposal of der Alte, who gets Julie, what firm my brother and I are working for ... there are no loose ends, troublesome and incomplete.

And yet. Suppose he had emigrated. Where would he be now? What would his life consist of? He and Richard Kongrosian ... colonists in a distant land. But there was no use thinking about that because he had turned that down; he had *not* emigrated and now the moment of choice had passed. He shoved the thought aside and turned back to the matter at hand.

‘You're going to find it a lot different, working for a small outfit,' he said to Vince, ‘instead of a cartel. The anonymity, the impersonal

bureaucratic -- ‘

‘Be quiet!' Vince interrupted. ‘There's another bulletin.

Again he turned up the car radio.

‘ ... duties, because of his illness, have been assumed by the Vice President, and it is understood that a special election is to be announced shortly. Dr Rudi Kalbfleisch's condition meanwhile remains -- ‘

‘They're not going to give us much time,' Vince said, frowning nervously and chewing on his lower lip.

‘We can do it,' Chic said. He was not worried. Maury would find a way; his boss would come through, now that he'd been given the chance.

Failure, now that the big break had arrived, simply was not possible. For any of them.

God, suppose he started worrying about that!

Seated in the big blue easychair, the Reichsmarschall pondered Nicole's proposition. Nicole, sipped iced tea, silently waited, in her authentic Directorate chair at the far end of the Lotus Room of the White House.

‘What you're asking,' Goering said at last, ‘is nothing less than that we repudiate our oaths to Adolf Hitler. Is it that you don't comprehend the Fuhrer Prinzip, the Leader Principle? Possibly I can explain it to you. For example, imagine a ship in which -- ‘

‘I don't want a lecture,' Nicole snapped. ‘I want a decision. Or can't you decide? Have you lost that capacity?'

‘But if we do this,' Goering said, ‘we're no better than the July Bomb Plotters. In fact we would have to plant a bomb exactly as they did or will do, however one expresses it.' He rubbed his forehead wearily. ‘I find this singularly difficult. Why is there such urgency?'

‘Because I want it settled,' Nicole said.

Goering sighed. ‘You know, our greatest mistake in Nazi Germany was our failure to harness the abilities of women properly. We relegated them to the kitchen and bedroom. They were not really utilized in the war effort, in administration or production or within the apparatus of the Party. Observing you I can see what a dreadful mistake we made.'

‘If you have not decided within the next six hours,' Nicole said, ‘I will have the von Lessinger technicians return you to the Age of Barbarism and any deal which we might make -- ‘

She gestured a sharp cutting-motion that Goering watched with apprehension. ‘It's all over.'

‘I simply do not have the authority,' Goering began.

‘Listen,' she leaned towards him, ‘you better have. What did you think, what thoughts passed through your mind, when you saw your

great bloated corpse lying in the jail cell at Nuremberg? You have a choice: *that,* or assuming the authority to negotiate with me.' She sat back, then, and sipped more iced tea.

Goering said hoarsely, 'I -- will think further about it. During the next few hours. Thank you for the extension of time. Personally, I have nothing against the Jews. I'd be quite willing to -- '

'Then do so.' Nicole rose to her feet. The Reichsmarschall sat slumped over broodingly, evidently unaware that she had risen. She walked from the room leaving him. What a dismal, contemptible individual, she thought. Emasculated by the power-arrangement of the Third Reich; unable to do anything on his own as a unique individual -- no wonder they lost the war. And to think that in World War One he was a gallant brave ace, a member of Richtofen's Flying Circus, flying one of those tiny, flimsy, wire and wood aeroplanes. Hard to believe it was the same man ...

Through a window of the White House she saw crowds outside the gates. The curious, here because of Rudi's 'illness.' Nicole smiled momentarily. The watchers at the gate ... keeping the vigil. They would be there from now on, day and night, as if waiting for World Series seat tickets, until Kalbfleisch 'died.' And then they would silently drift off. Heaven knew what they came for. Didn't they have anything else to do? She had wondered about them many times before, at the previous occasions. Were they always the same people? Interesting speculation.

She turned a corner -- and found herself facing Bertold Goltz.

'I hurried here as soon as I heard,' Goltz said, lazily. 'So the old man's strutted his little period and now is to be hustled off. He didn't last very long, this one. And Herr Hogben will replace him, a certain mythical, non-existent construct with that apt appellation. I was over at the Frauenzimmer *Werke;* they're going great guns, there.'

'What do you want here?' Nicole demanded.

Goltz shrugged. 'Conversation, perhaps. I eternally enjoy chatting with you. Actually, however, I have a distinct purpose: to warn you. Karp und Sohnen has an agent in the Frauenzimmer Werke already.'

'I'm aware of that,' Nicole said. 'And don't refer to the Frauenzimmer firm as a "Werke." They're too small to be a cartel.'

'A cartel can be small in size. What matters is that they hold a monopoly; there's no competition -- Frauenzimmer has it all. Now Nicole, you had better listen to me; better have your von Lessinger technicians preview events vis-à-vis the Frauenzimmer people. For the next two months or so at the very least. I think you'll be surprised. Karp is not going to give up that easily; you should have thought of that.'

'We keep the situation in -- '

‘No you don't,' Goltz said. ‘You have *nothing* under control. Look ahead and you'll see. You're becoming complacent, like a big fat cat.' He saw her touch the emergency button at her throat and he smiled broadly. ‘The alarm, Nicky? Because of *me?* Well, I guess I'll stroll on. By the way: congratulations on stopping Kongrosian before he could emigrate. That was a genuine coup on your part. However -- you don't know it yet, but your snaring of Kongrosian has dragged a little more than you anticipated into existence. Please make use of your von Lessinger equipment; it's so uniquely valuable in situations like this.'

Two grey-clad NP men appeared at the end of the corridor. Nicole signalled brusquely to them and they scrambled to get out their guns.

Yawning, Goltz vanished.

‘He's gone,' Nicole said to the NP men, accusingly. Of course Goltz was gone; she had expected it. But at least this had terminated the conversation; she was rid of his presence.

We ought to go back, Nicole thought, to Goltz's babyhood and destroy him then. But Goltz had anticipated them. He was long since back there, at the time of his birth and onward into childhood. Guarding himself, training himself, crooning over his child-self; through the von Lessinger principle Bertold Goltz had become, in effect, his own parent He was his own constant companion, his own Aristotle, for the initial fifteen years of his life, and for that reason the younger Goltz could not be surprised.

Surprise. That was the element which von Lessinger had nearly banished from politics. Everything now was pure cause and effect. At least, so she hoped.

‘Mrs Thibodeaux,' one of the NP men said, very respectfully, ‘there is a man from A.G. Chemie to see you. A Mr Merrill Judd. We brought him up.'

‘Oh yes,' Nicole said, nodding. She had an appointment with him; Judd had some fresh ideas as to how to go about curing Richard Kongrosian. The psych-chemist had approached the White House as soon as he had learned that Kongrosian had been found. ‘Thank you,' she said, and started towards the California Poppy Room where she was to meet with Judd.

Damn those Karps, Anton and Felix, she thought as she hurried along the carpeted corridor, the two NP men following behind her. Suppose they attempt to sabotage the Dieter Hogben Project -- perhaps Goltz is right: *perhaps we've got to act against them!*

But they were so strong. And so resourceful. The Karps, father and son, were old pros at this business, even more so than she herself.

I wonder what Goltz meant exactly, she thought. About our having dragged more than we anticipated into existence when we regained possession of Richard Kongrosian. Something to do with

Loony Luke? There was another one, as bad as the Karps or Goltz; another pirate and nihilist, out for himself at the expense of the state. How complicated everything had become, and still there was the unfinished, nagging business deal with Goering hanging over everything else. The Reichsmarschall simply could not decide and would not, would never finalize, and his indecision was stopping the wheels, keeping her attention fixed there, and at far too great a cost. If Goering did not decide by tonight. He would be, as she had assured him, back in his own time by eight this evening. Involved in a losing war which would eventually -- and he would be acutely aware of it cost him his fat life.

I'll see that Goering gets exactly what's due him, she said savagely to herself. And Goltz and the Karps, too. All of them, including Loony Luke. But it must be done carefully, with each matter handled in sequence. Right now she had a more pressing problem, that of Kongrosian.

Swiftly, she entered the California Poppy Room and greeted the A.G. Chemie psych-chemist, Merrill Judd.

In his sleep Ian Duncan had a terrible dream. A hideous old woman with greenish, wrinkled claws scrabbled at him, whining for him to do something -- he did not understand what it was because her voice, her words, blurred into indistinction, swallowed by her broken-toothed mouth, lost in the twisting thread of saliva which found its way to her chin. He struggled to free himself, to wake from his nap, to escape from her ...

'Chrissake,' Al's peevish voice filtered through the layers of semi-consciousness to him. 'Wake up! We have to get the lot moving; we're supposed to be at the White House in less than three hours.'

Nicole, Ian realized as he sat up groggily. It was her I was dreaming about; ancient and withered, with dry, shrunken, deathly-stale paps, but still her. 'Okay,' he muttered as he rose unsteadily to his feet. 'I sure as hell didn't mean to doze off. And I sure paid for it; I had a terrible dream about Nicole Al. Listen suppose she really is old, despite what we saw? Suppose it's a trick, a projected illusion. I mean -- '

'We'll perform,' Al said. 'Play our jugs.'

'But I couldn't live through it,' Ian Duncan said. 'My ability to adjust is just too precarious. This is turning into a nightmare; Luke controls the papoola and maybe Nicola is old -- what's the point of going on? Can't we go back to just seeing her on the TV screen? That's good enough for me. I want that, the image. Okay?'

'No,' Al said doggedly. 'We have to see this through. Remember, you can always emigrate to Mars; we have the means right at hand.'

The lot had already risen, was already moving towards the East

Coast and Washington, D.C.

When they landed, Harold Slezak, a rotund, genial little man, greeted them warmly; he shook hands with them, putting them at their ease as they walked towards the service entrance of the White House. 'Your programme is ambitious,' he burbled, 'but you can fulfil it, fine with me, with us here, the First Family I mean, and in particular the First Lady herself who is actively enthusiastic about all forms of original artistry. According to your biographical data you two made a thorough study of primitive disc recordings from the early nineteen hundreds, as early as 1920, of jug bands surviving from the US Civil War, so you're authentic juggists except of course, you're classical, not folk.'

'Yes sir,' Al said.

'Could you, however, slip in *one* folk work?' Slezak asked as they passed the NP guards at the service entrance and entered the White House, the long, quiet corridor with its artificial candles set at intervals. 'For instance, we suggest "Rockaby My Sara Jane." Do you have that in your repertoire? If not?'

'We have it,' Al said shortly. A look of repugnance appeared on his face and then immediately was gone.

'Fine,' Slezak said, prodding the two of them amiably ahead of him. Now may I ask what this creature you carry is?' He eyed the papoola with something less than active enthusiasm. 'Is it *alive?'*

'It's our totem animal,' Al said.

'You mean a superstitious charm? A mascot?'

'Exactly,' Al said. 'With it we assuage anxiety.' He patted the papoola's head. 'And it's part of our act; it dances while we play. You know, like a monkey.'

'Well, I'll be darned,' Slezak said, his enthusiasm returning. 'I see, now. Nicole will be delighted; she loves soft furry things.' He held a door open ahead of them.

And there she sat.

How could Luke have been so wrong? Ian Duncan thought. She was even lovelier than their glimpse of her at the lot, and in comparison with her TV image she was much more distinct. That was the cardinal difference, the fabulous authenticity of her appearance, its reality to the senses. The senses knew difference. Here she sat, in faded blue-cotton trousers, moccasins on her small feet, a carelessly-buttoned white shirt through which he could see -- or imagined he could see -- her tanned, smooth skin. How informal she was. Ian thought. Lacking in pretense or vain-glory. Her hair cut short, exposing her beautifully-formed neck and ears -- which fascinated him, captured his whole attention.

And, he thought, so darn young. She did not look even twenty. He

wondered if by some miracle she remembered him. Or Al.

'Nicole,' Slezak said, 'these are the classical juggists.'

She glanced up, sideways; she had been reading *The Times.*

Now she smiled in greeting. 'Good afternoon,' she said. 'Did you two have lunch? We could serve you some Canadian bacon and butterhorns and coffee as a snack, if you want.' Her voice, oddly, did not seem to come from her; it materialized from the upper portion of the room, almost at the ceiling. Looking that way, Ian saw a series of speakers and he realized with a start that a glass or plastic barrier separated Nicole from them, a security measure to protect her. He felt disappointed and yet he understood why it was necessary. If anything happened to her'We ate, Mrs Thibodeaux,' Al said. 'Thanks.' He, too, was glancing up at the speakers.

We ate Mrs Thibodeaux, Ian Duncan thought crazily.

Isn't it actually the other way around? Doesn't she, sitting here in her blue-cotton pants and shirt, doesn't she devour *us?* Strange thought ...

'Look,' Nicole said to Harold Slezak. 'They have one of those little papoolas with them -- won't that be fun?' To Al she said, 'Could I see it? Let it come here.' She made a signal, and the transparent wall began to lift.

Al dropped the papoola and it scuttled towards Nicole, beneath the raised security barrier; it hopped up, and all at once Nicole held it in her strong, competent hands, gazing down at it intently as if peering deep inside it.

'Heck,' she said, 'it's not alive; it's just a toy.'

'None survived,' Al explained. 'As far as we know. But this is an authentic model, based on fossil remains found on Mars.' He stepped towards her. The barrier settled abruptly in place. Al was cut off from the papoola and he stood gaping foolishly, seemingly very upset. Then, as if by instinct, he touched the controls at his waist. The papoola slid from Nicole's hands and hopped clumsily to the floor. Nicole exclaimed in amazement, her eyes bright.

'Do you want one, Nicky?' Harold Slezak asked her. 'We can undoubtedly get you one, even several.'

'What does it do?' Nicole said.

Slezak bubbled, 'It dances, ma'am, when they play it has rhythm in its bones -- correct, Mr Duncan? Maybe you could play something now, a shorter piece, to show Mrs Thibodeaux.' He rubbed his ample hands together vigorously, nodding to Ian and Al.

'S-sure,' Al said. He and Ian looked at each other. 'Uh, we could play that little Schubert thing, that arrangement of "The Trout." Okay, Ian, get set.' He unbuttoned the protective case from his jug, lifted it out and held it awkwardly. Ian did the same. "This is Al Miller, here at

first jug,' Al said.

'And beside me is my partner, Ian Duncan, at second jug. Bringing you a concert of classical favourites, beginning with a little Schubert.'

Bump bump-bump BUMP-BUMP buump bump, babump-bump bup-bup-bup-bup-bupppppp ...

Nicole said suddenly, 'Now I remember where I saw you two before. Especially you, Mr Miller.'

Lowering their jugs they waited apprehensively.

'At that jalopy jungle,' Nicole said. 'When I went to pick up Richard. You talked to me; you asked me to leave Richard alone.'

'Yes,' Al admitted.

'Didn't you suppose I'd remember you?' Nicole asked. 'For heaven's sake?'

Al said, 'You see so many people -- '

'But I have a good memory,' Nicole said. 'Even for those who aren't too dreadfully important. You should have waited a little longer before coming here ... or perhaps you don't care.'

'We care,' Al said. 'We care a lot.'

She studied him for a long time. 'Musicians are funny people,' she said aloud, at last. 'They don't think like other people, I've discovered. They live in their own private fantasy world, like Richard does. He's the worst. But he's also the best, the finest of the White House musicians. Perhaps it has to go together; I don't know, I don't have any theory about it. Someone should do a definitive scientific study on the subject and settle it once and for all. Well, go ahead with your number.'

'Okay,' Al said, glancing quickly at Ian.

'You never told me you said that to her,' Ian said. 'Asking her to leave Kongrosian alone -- you never mentioned that.'

'I thought you knew; I thought you were there and heard it.' Al shrugged. 'Anyhow, I didn't really believe she'd remember me.' Obviously it still seemed impossible to him; his face was a maze of disbelief.

They began to play once again.

Bump-bump-bump BUMP-BUMP buuump bump ...

Nicole giggled.

We've failed, Ian thought. God, the worst had come about; we're ludicrous. He ceased playing; Al continued on, his cheeks red and swelling with the effort of playing. He seemed unaware that Nicole was holding her hand up to conceal her laughter, her amusement at them and their efforts. Al played on, by himself, to the end of the piece, and then he, too, lowered his jug.

'The papoola,' Nicole said, as evenly as possible. 'It didn't dance. Not one little step -- why not?' And again she laughed, unable to stop

herself.

Al said woodenly, ‘I -- don't have control of it; it's on remote right now.' To Ian he said, ‘Luke's got control of it, still.' He turned to the papoola and said in a loud voice, ‘You better dance.'

‘Oh really, this is wonderful,' Nicole said. ‘Look,' she said, to a woman who had just joined her; it was Janet Raimer -- Ian recognized her. ‘He has to *beg* it to dance. Dance, whatever your name is, papoola-thing from Mars, or rather imitation papoola-thing from Mars.' she prodded the papoola with the toe of her moccasin, trying to nudge it into life. ‘Come on, little synthetic ancient cute creature, all made out of wires. Please.' She prodded it a little harder.

The papoola leaped at her. It bit her.

Nicole screamed. A sharp pop sounded from behind her, and the papoola vanished into particles that swirled. A White House NP man stepped into sight, his rifle in his hands, peering at her and at the floating particles; his face was calm but his hands and the rifle quivered. Al began to curse to himself, chanting the words sing-song over and over again, the same three or four, unceasingly.

‘Luke,' he said, then, to Ian. ‘He did it. Revenge. It's the end of us.' He looked tunelessly old, haggard, worn out.

Reflectively he began wrapping his jug up once more, going through the motions in mechanical fashion, step by step.

‘You're under arrest,' a second White House NP guard said, appearing behind them and training his rule on the two of them.

‘Sure,' Al said listlessly, his head nodding, wobbling vacuously. ‘We had nothing to do with it so arrest us.'

Getting to her feet with the assistance of Janet Raimer, Nicole walked slowly towards Al and Ian. At the transparent barrier she stopped. ‘Did it bite me because I laughed?' she said in a quiet voice.

Slezak stood mopping his forehead. He said nothing; he merely stared at them all sightlessly.

‘I'm sorry,' Nicole said. ‘I made it angry, didn't I? It's a shame; we would have enjoyed your act. This evening after dinner.'

‘Luke did it,' Al said to her.

‘ "Luke." ‘ Nicole studied him. ‘Yes, that's right; he's your employer.' To Janet Raimer she said, ‘I guess we'd better have him arrested, too. Don't you think?'

‘Anything you say,' Janet Raimer said, pale and terribly frightened-looking.

Nicole said, ‘This whole jug business ... it was just a cover-up for an action directly hostile to us, wasn't it? A crime against the state. We'll have to rethink the entire philosophy of inviting performers here -- perhaps it's been a mistake from the very start. It gives too much access to anyone who has hostile intentions towards us. I'm sorry.'

She looked sad, now; she folded her arms and stood rocking back and forth, lost in thought.

'Believe me, Nicole -- ' Al began.

Introspectively, to herself, she said, 'I'm not Nicole. Don't call me that. Nicole Thibodeaux died years ago. I'm Kate Rupert, the fourth one to take her place. I'm just an actress who looks enough like the original Nicole to be able to keep this job, and sometimes, when something like this happens I wish that I didn't have it. I have no real authority, in the ultimate sense. There's a council that governs ... I never see them; they're not interested in me and I'm not in them. So that makes it even.'

After a time Al said, 'How -- many attempts have there been on your life?'

'Six or seven,' she said. 'I forget exactly. All for psychological reasons. Unresolved Oedipal complexes or something bizarre like that. I don't really care.' She turned to the NP men, then; there were now several squads of them on hand. Pointing to Al and Ian she said, 'It seems to me they don't appear as if they know what's going on. Maybe they are innocent.' To Harold Slezak and Janet Raimer she said, 'Do they have to be destroyed? I don't see why you couldn't just eradicate a portion of the memory-cells of their brains and then let them go. Why wouldn't that do?'

Slezak glanced at Janet Raimer, then shrugged. 'If you want it that way.'

'Yes,' Nicole said. 'I'd prefer that. It would make my job easier. Take them to the Medical Centre at Bethesda and after that release them. And now let's go on; let's give an audience to the next performers.'

A NP man nudged Ian in the back with his gun. 'Down the corridor, please.'

'Okay,' Ian managed to murmur, gripping his jug. But what happened? he wondered. I don't quite understand.

This woman isn't really Nicole and even worse there is no Nicole anywhere; there's just the TV image after all, the illusion of the media, and behind it, behind her, another group entirely rules. A corporate body of some kind. But who are they and how did they get power? How long have they had it? Will we ever know? We came so far; we almost seemed to know what's really going on. The actuality behind the illusion, the secrets kept from us all our lives. Can't they tell us the rest? There can't be much more. And what difference would it make now? 'Goodbye,' Al was saying to him.

'W-what?' he said, horrified. 'Why do you say that? They're going to let us go, aren't they?'

Al said, 'We won't remember each other. Take my word for it; we

won't be allowed to keep any recollections like that. So -- ‘ He held out his hand. ‘So goodbye, Ian. We made it to the White House, didn't we? You won't remember that either, but that's still true; we did do it.' He grinned crookedly.

‘Move along,' the NP man said to the two of them.

Still -- pointlessly -- holding their jugs, Al Miller and Ian Duncan moved step by step down the corridor, in the direction of the outer door and the waiting black medical van which they knew lay beyond.

It was night, and Ian Duncan found himself at a deserted street corner, cold and shivering, blinking in the glaring white light of an urban pubtrans loading platform. What am I doing here? he asked himself, bewildered. He looked at his wristwatch; it was eight o'clock. I'm supposed to be at the All Souls Meeting, aren't I? he thought dazedly.

I can't miss another one, he realized. Two in a row -- it's a terrible fine; it's economically ruinous. He began to walk.

The familiar building, The Abraham Lincoln with all its network of towers and windows, lay extended ahead, it was not far and he hurried, breathing deeply, trying to keep a good steady pace. It must be over, he thought. The lights in the great central auditorium were not lit. Damn it, he breathed in despair.

‘All Souls over?' he said to the doorman as he entered the lobby, his identification held out to the official reader.

‘You're a little confused, Mr Duncan,' Vince Strikerock said. ‘All Souls was last night; this is Friday.'

Something's gone wrong, Ian realized. But he said nothing; he merely nodded and hurried on towards the elevator.

As he emerged from the elevator on his own floor, a door opened and a furtive figure beckoned him. ‘Hey, Duncan!'

It was a building resident named Corley, who he barely knew. Because an encounter like this could be disastrous, Ian approached him with wariness. ‘What is it?'

‘A rumour,' Corley said in a rapid, fear-filled voice.

‘About your last relpol test -- some irregularity. They're going to rouse you at five or six A.M. tomorrow and spring a surprise relpol quiz on you.' He glanced up and down the hall. ‘Study the late 1980's and the religio-collectivist movements in particular. Got it?'

‘Sure,' Ian said, with gratitude. ‘And thanks a lot. Maybe I can do the same -- ‘ He broke off, because Corley had scuttled back into his own apartment again and shut the door. Ian was alone.

Certainly very nice of him, he thought as he walked on.

Probably saved my hide, kept me from being forcibly evicted right out of here, forever.

When he reached his apartment he made himself comfortable,

with all his reference books on the political history of the United States spread out around him. I'll study all night, he decided. Because I have to pass that quiz; I have no choice.

To keep himself awake, he turned on the TV. Presently the warm, familiar being, the presence of the First Lady, flowed into existence and began to permeate the room.

‘ ... and at our musical tonight,' she was saying, ‘we will have a saxophone quartet which will play themes from Wagner's operas, in particular my favourite, *die Meistersinger*. I believe we will all find that a deeply rewarding and certainly an enriching experience to cherish. And, after that, I have arranged to bring you once again an old favourite of yours, the world-renowned cellist, Henri LeClerc, in a programme of Jerome Kern and Cole Porter.' She smiled, and at his pile of reference books, Ian Duncan smiled back.

I wonder how it would be to play at the White House, he said to himself. To perform before the First Lady. Too bad I never learned to play any kind of musical instrument. I can't act, write poems, dance *or* sing -- nothing. So what hope is there for me? Now, if I had come from a musical family, if I had had a father or a mother to teach me ...

Glumly, he scratched a few notes on the rise of the French Christian-Fascist Party of 1975. And then, drawn as always to the TV set, he put his pen down and turned his chair so that he faced the set. Nicole was now exhibiting a piece of Delft tile which she had picked up, she explained, in a little shop in Schweinfurt, Germany. What lovely clear colours it had ... he watched, fascinated,' as her strong, slim fingers caressed the shiny surface of the baked enamel tile.

‘See the tile,' Nicole was murmuring in her husky voice. ‘Don't you wish you had a tile like that? Isn't it lovely?'

‘Yes,' Ian Duncan said.

‘How many of you would like someday to see such a tile?'

Nicole asked. ‘Raise your hands.'

Ian raised his hand hopefully.

‘Oh, a whole lot of you,' Nicole said, smiling her intimate radiant smile. ‘Well, perhaps later we will have another tour of the White House. Would you like that?'

Hopping up and down in his chair, Ian said, ‘Yes, I'd like that!'

On the TV screen she was smiling directly at him, it seemed. And so he smiled back. And then, reluctantly, feeling a great weight descend over him, he at last turned back to his reference books. Back to the harsh realities of his daily endless life.

Against the window of his apartment something bumped and a voice called to him thinly, ‘Ian Duncan, I don't have much time!'

Whirling, he saw outside in the night darkness a shape drifting, an egg-like construction that hovered. Within it a man waved at him

energetically, still calling. The egg gave off a dull *putt-putt* noise, its jets idling as the man kicked open the hatch of the vehicle and lifted himself out.

Are they after me already on this quiz? Ian Duncan asked himself. He stood up, feeling helpless. So soon ... I'm not ready, yet.

Angrily, the man in the vehicle spun the jets until their steady white exhaust-firing met the surface of the building; the room shuddered and bits of plaster broke away. The window itself collapsed as the heat of the jets crossed it.

Through the gap exposed the man yelled once more, trying to attract Ian Duncan's dulled faculties.

'Hey, Duncan! Hurry up! I have your buddy already; he's on his way in another ship!' The man, elderly, wearing an expensive natural fibre blue pinstripe suit which was slightly old-fashioned, lowered himself with dexterity from the hovering egg-shaped vehicle and dropped feet-first into the room. 'We have to get going if we're to make it. You don't remember me? Neither did Al.'

Ian Duncan stared at him, wondering who he was and who Al was.

'Mama's psychologists did a good job of working you over,' the elderly man panted. 'That Bethesda -- it must be quite a place.' He came towards Ian, caught hold of him by the shoulder. 'The NP's are shutting down all the jalopy jungles; I have to beat it to Mars and I'm taking you along with me. Try to pull yourself together; I'm Loony Luke you don't remember me now but you will after we're all on Mars and you see your buddy Al again. *Come on!'*

Luke propelled him towards the gap in the wall of the room, the opening which had once been a window, and towards the vehicle -- it was called a jalopy, Ian realized -- drifting beyond.

'Okay,' Ian said, wondering what he should take with him. What would he need on Mars? Toothbrush, pyjamas, a heavy coat? He looked frantically around his apartment, one last inspection of it.

Far off, police sirens sounded.

Luke scrambled back into the jalopy, and Ian followed, taking hold of the elderly man's extended hand. The floor of the jalopy, he discovered to his surprise crawled with bright orange bug-like creatures whose antennae waved at him as he sprawled among them. Papoolas, he remembered. Or something like that.

You'll be all right now, the papoolas were thinking in unison.

Don't worry; Loony Luke got you away in time, just barely in time. Relax.

'Yes,' Ian agreed. He lay back against the side of the jalopy and relaxed, as the ship shot upwards into the night emptiness and the new planet which lay ahead.

13

‘I certainly would like to leave the White House,' Richard Kongrosian said peevishly to the NP men guarding him. He felt irritable and also apprehensive; he stood as far from Commissioner Pembroke as possible. It was Pembroke, he knew, who was in charge.

Wilder Pembroke said, ‘Mr Judd, the A.G. Chemie psychchemist, will be here any minute. So please be patient, Mr Kongrosian.' His voice was calm but not soothing; it had a hard edge which made Kongrosian even more unstrung.

‘This is intolerable,' Kongrosian said. ‘You guarding me like this, watching everything I do. I simply can't tolerate being watched: I have *paranoia sensitiva;* don't you realize that?'

There was a knock at the door of the room. ‘Mr Judd to see Mr Kongrosian,' a White House attendant called in Pembroke opened the door of the room, admitting Merrill Judd, who entered briskly, official briefcase in hand. Mr Kongrosian. Glad to meet you face to face, at last.'

‘Hello, Judd,' Kongrosian murmured, feeling sullen about everything which was going on around him.

‘I have here with me some new, experimental medication for you,' Judd informed him, opening the briefcase and reaching within. ‘The imipramine hcl -- twice a day, 50 mg each. That's the orange tablet. The brown tablet is our new methabyretinate oxide, 100 mg per -- ‘

‘Poison,' Kongrosian broke in.

‘Pardon?' Alertly, Judd cupped his ear.

‘I won't take it; this is part of a carefully laid plot to kill me.' There was no doubt of it in Kongrosian's mind. He had realized it as soon as Judd had arrived with the official A.G. Chemie briefcase.

‘Not at all,' Judd said, glancing sharply at Pembroke. ‘I assure you. We're trying to help you. It's our job to help you, sir.'

‘Is that why you kidnapped me?' Kongrosian said.

‘I did not kidnap you,' Judd said cautiously. ‘Now as to -- ‘

‘You're all working together,' Kongrosian said. And he had an answer for it; he had been preparing for the exact moment when the time was right. Summoning his psychokinetic talent he lifted both his arms and directed the power of his attention towards the psych-chemist Merrill Judd.

The psych-chemist rose from the floor, dangled in air; still clutching his official A.G. Chemie briefcase, he gaped at Kongrosian and Pembroke. Eyes protruding, he tried to speak, and then Kongrosian whisked him at the closed door of the room. The door, wooden and hollow-core splintered as Judd swept against it and

through it; he disappeared from Kongrosian's sight then. Only Pembroke and his NP men remained in the room with him.

Clearing his throat, Wilder Pembroke said huskily, 'Perhaps -- we should see how badly he's hurt.' As he started towards the ruined door he added, over his shoulder, 'I would think that A.G. Chemie will be somewhat upset by this. To put it mildly.'

'The hell with A.G. Chemie,' Kongrosian said. 'I want my own doctor; I don't trust anybody you bring in here. How do I know he was actually even from A.G. Chemie? He was probably an impostor.'

'In any case,' Pembroke said, 'you hardly have to worry about him, now.' Gingerly, he opened the remains of the wooden door.

'Was he truly from A.G. Chemie?' Kongrosian asked, following him out into the corridor.

'You talked to him on the phone yourself; it was you who called him into this initially.' Pembroke seemed angry and agitated, now, as he searched the corridor for a sign of Judd. 'Where is he?' he demanded. *'What in the name of God did you do with him,* Kongrosian?'

Kongrosian said, with reluctance, 'I moved him downstairs to the subsurface laundry room. He's all right.'

'Do you know what the von Lessinger principle is?' Pembroke asked him, eyeing him tensely.

'Of course.'

Pembroke said, 'As a member of the higher NP, I have access to von Lessinger equipment. Would you like to know whom you'll next mistreat by means of your psychokinetic ability?'

'No,' Kongrosian said.

'Knowing would be to your advantage. Because you might want to stop yourself; it will be a manoeuvre you'll regret.'

'Who's the person?' Kongrosian asked, then.

'Nicole,' Pembroke said. 'You can tell me something if you want. Under what operating theory have you refrained, up until now, from using your talent politically?'

' "Politically"?' Kongrosian echoed. He did not see how he had used it politically.

'Politics,' Pembroke said, 'if I may remind you, is the art of getting other people to do what you want them to, by force if necessary. Your application of psychokinesis just now was rather unusual in its directness ... but nevertheless it was a political act.'

Kongrosian said, 'I always felt it was wrong to use it on people.'

'But now -- '

'Now,' Kongrosian said, 'the situation is different. I'm a captive; everyone's against me. You're against me, for instance. I may have to use it against you.'

'Please don't,' Pembroke said. He smiled tightly. 'I'm merely a

salaried employee of a government agency, doing my job.'

'You're a lot more than that,' Kongrosian said. 'I'd be interested in knowing how I'm going to use my talent against Nicole.' He could not imagine himself doing that; he was too awed by her. Too reverent.

Pembroke said, 'Why don't we wait and see.'

'It strikes me as strange,' Kongrosian said, 'that you'd go to the trouble of using von Lessinger equipment merely to find out about me. After all, I'm utterly worthless, an outcast from humanity. A freak that should never have been born.'

'That's your illness talking,' Pembroke said. 'When you say that. And down inside your mind somewhere you know that.'

'But you must admit,' Kongrosian persisted, 'that it's unusual for someone to use the von Lessinger machinery as you evidently have. What's your reason?' Your *real* reason, he thought to himself.

'My task is to protect Nicole. Obviously, since you will soon be making an overt move in her direction -- '

'I think you're lying about that,' Kongrosian interrupted. 'I could never do anything like that. Not to Nicole.'

Wilder Pembroke raised an eyebrow. And then he turned and rang the elevator button to begin his trip downstairs to search for the psych-chemist from A.G. Chemie.

'What are you up to?' Kongrosian asked. He was highly suspicious of the NP men anyhow, always had been and always would be, and particularly so ever since the NP had shown up at the jalopy jungle and seized him. And this man impelled an even greater suspicion and hostility in him, although he did not understand quite why.

'I'm just doing my job,' Pembroke repeated.

And still, for reasons he did not consciously know, Kongrosian did not believe him.

'How do you now expect to get well?' Pembroke asked him as the elevator doors opened. 'Since you've destroyed the A.G. Chemie man -- ' He entered the elevator, beckoning Kongrosian to join him.

'My own doctor. Egon Superb; he can still cure me.'

'Do you want to see him? It can be arranged.'

'Yes!' Kongrosian said eagerly. 'As soon as possible. He's the only one in the universe who isn't against me.'

'I could take you there myself,' Pembroke said, a thoughtful expression on his flat, hard face. '

If I thought it was a good idea ... and I'm not very certain of that, at this point.'

'If you don't take me,' Kongrosian said, 'I'll pick you up with my talent and set you down in the Potomac.'

Pembroke shrugged. 'Doubtless you could. But according to the von Lessinger equipment, you probably won't. I'll take the chance.'

‘I don't think the von Lessinger principle can deal properly with us Psis,' Kongrosian said irritably as he also entered the elevator. ‘At least, I've heard that said. We act as acausal factors.' This was a difficult man to deal with, a strong man whom he actively did not like. Like -- or trust.

Maybe it's just the police mentality, he conjectured as the two of them descended.

Or maybe it's more.

Nicole, he thought. You know darn well I could never do anything to you; it's utterly out of the question -- my entire world would collapse. It would be like injuring my own mother or sister, someone sacred.

I've got to keep my talent in check, he realized. Please, dear Lord, help me keep my psychokinetic ability in check whenever I'm around Nicole. Okay? As the elevator descended he waited, fervently, for an answer.

‘By the way,' Pembroke broke into his thoughts suddenly. ‘About your smell. It seems to be gone.'

‘Gone!' And then the implication of the NP man's remark struck him. ‘You mean you could detect my phobic body odour? But that's impossible! It can't actually be -- ‘ He ceased talking, confused. ‘And you say now it's gone.' He did not understand.

Pembroke eyed him. ‘I would certainly have noticed it here, cooped up with you in this elevator. Of course, it may come back. I'll be glad to let you know if it does.'

‘Thank you,' Kongrosian said. And thought, Somehow this man is getting the upper hand over me. Constantly. He's a master psychologist ... or is it that, by his definition, he's a master political strategist?

‘Cigarette?' Pembroke extended his pack.

Horrified, Kongrosian leaped back. ‘No. They're illegal too dangerous. I wouldn't dare smoke one.'

‘Always danger,' Pembroke said, as he lit up. ‘Right? A constantly dangerous world. You must be ceaselessly careful. What you need, Kongrosian, is a bodyguard. A squad of hand-picked, rigorously-trained NP men, with you at all times.' He added, ‘Otherwise -- ‘

‘Otherwise you don't think I have much of a chance.'

Pembroke nodded. ‘Very little, Kongrosian. And I say this on the basis of my use of the von Lessinger apparatus.'

From then on the two of them descended in silence.

The elevator stopped. The doors slid back. They were in the subsurface level of the White House. Kongrosian and Pembroke stepped out into the hall. A man, whom both of them recognized, stood waiting for them. ‘I want you to listen, Kongrosian,' Bertold

Goltz said to the pianist.

Swiftly, in a fraction of a second, the NP Commissioner had his pistol out. He aimed at Goltz and fired.

But Goltz had already vanished.

A piece of folded paper lay on the floor where he had stood. Goltz had dropped it. Stooping, Kongrosian reached for it.

'Don't touch that!' Pembroke said sharply.

It was too late. Kongrosian had it, was unfolding it. It read: *Pembroke leads you to your death.*

'Interesting,' Kongrosian said. He passed the slip of paper to the NP man; Pembroke put his pistol away and accepted it, scrutinizing it, his face distorted with outrage.

From behind them, Goltz said, 'Pembroke has waited months for you to be taken into custody, here at the White House. Now there isn't any time left.'

Spinning, Pembroke snatched at his pistol, brought it out and fired. Again Goltz, grinning with scornful bitterness, disappeared. You'll never get him, Kongrosian realized. Not as long as he has the von Lessinger equipment at his disposal.

Time left for what? he wondered. What's going to happen? Goltz seemed to know and probably Pembroke knows, too; they have identical equipment available to them.

And, he thought, how does it involve me? Me -- and my talent, which I've sworn to keep in check.

Does this mean I'm going to use it? He had no intuition that this was precisely what it meant.

And there was probably little he could do about it.

From outside the house Nat Flieger heard children playing.

They chanted some sort of dirge-like rhythm, unfamiliar to him. And he had been in the music business all his life. No matter how hard he tried he could not make out the words; they were strangely blurred, run-together.

'Mind if I look?' he asked Beth Kongrosian, rising to his feet from the creaky wicker chair.

Turning pale, Beth Kongrosian said, 'I -- would rather you didn't. Please don't look at the children. *Please!'*

Nat said gently, 'We're a recording company, Mrs Kongrosian. Anything and everything in the way of music is our business.' He absolutely could not refrain from going to the window to look; the instinct, right or wrong, was in his blood -- it came before civility or kindness, before all else. Peering out, he saw them, seated in a circle. And they were all chuppers. He wondered which was Plautus Kongrosian. They all looked so much alike to him. Perhaps the little boy in yellow shorts and T-shirt off to the side. Nat motioned to Molly

and Jim; they joined him at the window.

Five Neanderthal children, Nat thought. Plucked out of time; a sequence from the past snipped out and pasted here in this day and age, in the present, for us of EME to overhear, to record. I wonder what sort of an album cover our art department will want to put on this. He shut his eyes, no longer wishing to face the scene outside the window.

But we will go ahead, he knew. Because we came here to get something; we can't -- or at least we don't want to -- go back with nothing at all. And *this is important.*

This has to be dealt with, professionally. Perhaps it's more important even than Richard Kongrosian, good as he is. And we can't afford the luxury of paying attention to our delicate sensibilities.

'Jim,' he said presently. 'Get out the Ampek F-a2. Right away. Before they stop.'

Beth Kongrosian said, 'I won't let you record them.'

'We will,' Nat said to her. 'We're used to this, in folk music sessions done on the spot. It's been tested in USEA courts many times and the recording firm has always won.'

He followed after Jim Planck, in order to help assemble their recording gear.

'Mr Flieger, do you understand what they are?' Mrs Kongrosian called after him.

'Yes,' he said. And continued on.

Presently they had the Ampek F-a2 set up; the organism pulsed sleepily, undulating its pseudopodia as if hungry. The moist weather seemed to have affected it little; it was, if anything, torpid.

Appearing beside them, composed, her face rigid with determination, Beth Kongrosian said in a low voice, 'Listen to me, please. At night, in fact tonight in particular, there's going to be a gathering of them. The adults. At their hall, back in the woods very near here, on the red-rock side road they all use; it belongs to them, their organization. There will be a great deal of dancing and singing. What you want exactly. Much more than what you'll find here with these little children. So please; wait and record that instead.'

Nat said, 'We'll get both.' And signalled Jim to carry the Ampek F-a2 towards the circle of children.

'I'll put you up for the night, here in the house,' Beth Kongrosian said, hurrying after him. 'Very late, around two in the morning, they sing wonderfully -- it's hard to understand the words but -- ' She caught hold of his arm. 'Richard and I have been trying to train our child away from this. The children, as young as they are, don't really participate; you won't get the real thing from them. When you see the adults -- ' She broke off and then finished drably, 'Then you'll see what

I mean.'

Molly said to Nat, 'Let's wait.'

Hesitating, Nat turned to Jim Planck. Jim nodded.

'Okay,' Nat said to Mrs Kongrosian. 'If you'll take us to their hall, where they meet. And see that we get in.'

'Yes,' she said. 'I will. Thank you, Mr Flieger.'

I feel guilty, Nat said to himself. But he said aloud, 'Okay. And you -- ' His guilt overcame him, then. 'Heck, you don't have to put us up. We'll stay in Jenner.'

'I'd like to,' Beth Kongrosian said. 'I'm terribly lonely; I need the company, when Richard's away. You don't know what it means to have people from -- the outside come in here for a little while.'

The children, noticing the adults, broke off suddenly, shyly; they peeped at Nat and Molly and Jim wide-eyed. It would probably not have been possible to get them down anyhow, Nat realized. So he had lost nothing by his deal.

'Does this frighten you?' Beth Kongrosian asked him.

He shrugged. 'No. Not really.'

'The government knows about it,' she said. 'There have been many ethnologists and god knows what else sent out here to investigate. They all say it proves one thing; in prehistoric times, during the epoch before Cro-Magnon Man appeared -- ' She ceased, helplessly.

'They interbred,' Nat finished for her. 'Like the skeletons found in the caves in Israel indicated.'

'Yes.' She nodded. 'Possibly all the so-called sub-races. The races that didn't survive. They were absorbed by *Homo Sapiens.'*

'I'd make a different guess,' Nat said. 'It would seem more to me that the the so-called sub-races were mutations which existed for a short while and then dwindled away because they couldn't adapt as well. Perhaps there were radiation problems in those days.'

'I don't agree,' Beth Kongrosian said. 'And work they've done with the von Lessinger equipment tends to back me up. By your theory they would just be -- sports. But I believe they're true races ... I think they evolved separately from the original primate, from Proconsul. And at last came together, when *Homo Sapiens* migrated into their hunting lands.'

Molly said, 'Could I get another cup of coffee? I'm cold.'

She shivered. 'This damp air gets me down.'

'We'll go back into the house,' Beth Kongrosian agreed.

'Yes, you're not accustomed to the weather up here; I understand. I remember how it was when we first moved here.'

'Plautus was not born here,' Nat said.

'No.' She nodded. 'We came here because of him.'

‘Wouldn't the government have taken him?' Nat asked.

‘They maintain special schools for radiation survivors.' He avoided using the exact term; it would have been radiation *sports.*

‘We thought he would be happier here,' Beth Kongrosian said. ‘Most of them -- the chuppers, as they speak of themselves -- are here. They've come from every part of the world, during the last two decades.'

The four of them re-entered the warm, dry house.

‘He's actually a lovely-looking little boy,' Molly said.

‘Very sweet and sensitive-looking, despite -- ‘ She faltered.

‘The jaw and the shambling gait,' Mrs Kongrosian said matter of factly, ‘haven't fully formed. That begins in about the thirteenth year.' In the kitchen she began to heat water for their coffee.

Strange, what we're going to bring back from this trip, Nat Flieger thought to himself. So different from what we and Leo expected.

He thought, *I wonder how it'll sell.*

Amanda Conner's sweet, pure voice came from the intercom, startling Dr Egon Superb as he sat examining his schedule of tomorrow's appointments. ‘Someone to see you, doctor. A Mr Wilder Pembroke.'

Wilder Pembroke! Dr Superb sat up rigidly, and laid aside his appointment book reflexively. What did the NP official want this tune? He felt immediate, instinctive wariness and he said into the intercom, ‘Just a minute, please.'

Has he finally come to shut me down? he wondered. Then I must have seen that one, particular patient without realizing it.

The one I exist to serve; or rather, not to serve. The man I'm here to fail with.

Sweat stood out on his forehead as he thought, So now my career, like that of every other psychoanalyst in the USEA, ends. What'll I do now? Some of his colleagues had fled to Communist countries, but surely they were no better off there. Several had emigrated to Luna and Mars. And a few a surprisingly large ‘few' -- had applied for work with A.G. Chemie, the organization responsible in the first place for the stricture against them.

He was too young to retire and too old to learn another profession. Bitterly, he thought, so actually I can do nothing. I can't go on and I can't quit; it's a true doublebind, the sort of thing my patients are always getting themselves into. Now he could feel more compassion for them and the messes which they had made of *their* lives.

To Amanda he said, ‘Send Commissioner Pembroke in.'

The hard-eyed but quiet-spoken NP man, in ordinary street clothes as before, slowly entered the office and seated himself facing

Dr Superb.

‘That's quite a girl you have out there,' Pembroke said, and licked his lips. ‘I wonder what will become of her. Possibly we -- ‘

‘What do you want?' Superb said.

‘An answer. To a question.' Pembroke leaned back, got out a gold cigarette case, an antique from the previous century, lit up with his lighter, also an antique. Blowing smoke he made himself comfortable, crossing his legs. And said, ‘Your patient, Richard Kongrosian, has discovered that he can fight back.'

‘Against whom?'

‘His oppressors. Us, of course. Anyone else who comes along, for that matter. Here's what I would like to know. I want to work with Richard Kongrosian but I have to protect myself from him. Frankly, I'm afraid of him, at this point, more afraid of him, doctor, than of anyone else in the world. And I know why -- I've used von Lessinger's equipment and I know exactly what I'm talking about. *What's the key to his mind?* How can I arrange for Kongrosian to be -- ‘ Pembroke groped for the word; gesturing, he said, ‘Reliable. You understand. Obviously, I don't want to be picked up and set down six feet underground some morning when we have a minor tiff.' His face was pale and he was sitting with brittle stiffness.

After a pause Dr Superb said, ‘Now that I know who the patient is that I'm waiting for. You lied about the failing. I'm not supposed to fail. In fact I'm needed vitally. And the patient is quite sane.'

Pembroke regarded him intently but said nothing.

‘You're the patient. And you were totally aware of it, all along. Through you I've been misled. From the beginning.'

After a time Pembroke nodded.

‘And this is not government business,' Superb said. ‘This is an arrangement of your own. It has nothing to do with Nicole.' At least not directly, he thought.

‘Be careful.' Pembroke said. He got out his service pistol and held it loosely in his lap, but with his hand close to it.

‘I can't tell you how to control Kongrosian. I can't control him myself; you've seen that.'

‘But *you* would know,' Pembroke said, ‘assuming anyone would, *if* I can work with him; you know that much about him.' He stared at Superb, his eyes clear and unwinking. Waiting.

‘You'd have to tell me what you intend to propose to him.'

Pembroke, picking up his gun and holding it pointed directly at Dr Superb, said, ‘Tell me how he feels about Nicole.'

‘She's a Magna Mater figure to him. As she is to all of us.'

‘ "Magna Mater." ‘ Pembroke leaned forward intently.

‘What's that?'

‘The great primordial mother.'

‘So in other words he idolizes her. She's like a goddess to him, not mortal. How would he react -- ‘ Pembroke hesitated. ‘Suppose Kongrosian suddenly became a *Ge,* a real one, possessing one of the most carefully-guarded government secrets. That Nicole died years ago, that this so-called "Nicole" is an actress. A girl named Kate Rupert.'

Superb's ears buzzed. He studied Pembroke, and knew one thing, knew it for the absolute reality it was. When this interchange was over, Pembroke would kill him.

‘Because,' Pembroke said, ‘that's the truth.' He shoved his gun back into its holster, then, *Would he lose his awe of her, then?* Would he be able to -- co-operate?'

After a time Superb said, ‘Yes. He would. Definitely so.'

Visibly, Pembroke relaxed. He ceased to tremble and some colour returned to his thin, flat face. ‘Good. And I hope you're disbursing the truth, doctor, because if you aren't I'll make my way back here, no matter what happens, and destroy you.' All at once he rose to his feet. ‘Goodbye.'

Superb said, ‘Am I now out of business?'

‘Of course. Why not?' Pembroke smiled composedly.

‘What good are you to anybody? You know that doctor. Your hour has passed. An amusing pun, in that you -- ‘

‘Suppose I tell you what you just now told me.'

‘Oh, please do. It'll make my job much easier. You see, doctor, I intend to make public that particular Geheimis to the *Bes.* And, simultaneously, Karp und Sohnen Werke will reveal the other.'

‘What other?'

‘You'll have to wait,' Pembroke said. ‘Until Anton and Felix Karp feel themselves ready.' He opened the office door. ‘I'll see you again soon, doctor. Thanks for the assistance.' The door closed behind him.

I have learned, Dr Superb realized, the ultimate secret of the state. I am now at the top rung of *Ge* society.

And it doesn't matter. Because there is no way I can use this information as an instrument by which to retain my career. And that is all that counts. As far as I'm concerned.

My career and nothing else. God damn it, *nothing!*

He felt overwhelming, vicious, raw hatred for Pembroke.

If I could kill him, Superb realized, I would. Right now. Follow after him. ‘Doctor,' Amanda's voice sounded from the intercom.

‘Mr Pembroke says that we must close up.' Her voice wavered. ‘Is that true? I thought they were going to let you go on for a while.'

‘He's right,' Superb admitted. ‘It's all over. You better phone my patients, everyone I have an appointment with, and tell them the

story.'

'Yes, doctor.' Tearfully, Amanda rang off.

Damn him, Superb said to himself. And there's nothing I can do about it. Nothing at all.

The intercom came on once again as Amanda said hesitantly, 'And he also said something else. I wasn't going to say -- but it was about me. I knew it'd make you angry.'

'What did he say?'

'He said -- maybe he could use me. He didn't say how but whatever it is I felt -- ' She was silent a moment. 'I felt sick,' she finished. 'In a way I never did before. No matter who was looking at me or talking to me. No matter what anybody said. This -- was different.'

Rising Superb walked to the office door, opened it. Pembroke had left, of course; he saw only Amanda Conners in the outer office, at her desk, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. Superb walked to the front door of the building, opened it and descended the stairs.

He unlocked the trunk of his parked wheel, got out the jack handle. With it, he started down the sidewalk. The shaft of steel felt slippery and cold within his grip as he searched for Commissioner Pembroke.

Far off he saw a shrunken figure. Altered perspective, Dr Superb realized. Makes him look little. But he's not. Dr Superb walked towards the NP man, holding the jack handle up. The figure of Pembroke grew.

Pembroke was paying no attention to him; he did not see Superb coming. Immobile, with a group of other persons, passers-by, Pembroke was gazing fixedly at the headlines displayed by a peripatetic news machine.

The headlines were huge and ominous and black. As he approached, Dr Superb saw them, made out the words. He slowed, lowered the jack handle, until at last he stood like the others.

'Karp discloses vast government secret!' the news machine screeched to everyone within hearing distance. 'Der Alte a simulacrum! New one already being built!'

The news machine began to wheel off in search of other customers. No one was buying here. Everyone had become frozen. It was dream-like to Dr Superb; he shut his eyes, thinking to himself, I have difficulty believing this. Terrible difficulty.

'Karp employee steals entire plans for next der Alte simulacrum!' the news machine, now half a block away, shrilled.

The sound of it echoed. 'Makes plans public!'

All these years, Dr Superb thought. We've worshipped a dummy. A being inert and devoid of life.

Opening his eyes, he saw Wilder Pembroke, bent grotesquely as he strained to hear the departing racket of the news machine; Pembroke took a few steps after it, as if hypnotized by it.

Pembroke, as he departed, dwindled as before. I've got to go after him, Dr Superb realized. Make him full-sized, real again so I can do to him what I have to. The jack handle became more slippery, so drenched that he could hardly hold on to it.

'Pembroke!' he called.

The figure halted, bleakly smiling. 'So now you know both of them. You're uniquely informed, Superb.' Pembroke walked back up the sidewalk towards him. 'I have some advice. I suggest that you call a reporting machine and give it your news, too. Are you afraid to?'

Superb managed to say, 'It's -- too much, all at once. I have to think.' Confused, he listened to the yammer of the news machine; it's voice was still audible.

'But you will tell,' Pembroke said. 'Eventually.' Still smiling, he brought out his service pistol and aimed it, expertly, at Superb's temple. 'I order you to, doctor.' He walked slowly along the sidewalk, up to Dr Superb. 'There's no time left, now, because Karp und Sohnen has made its move. This is the moment, doctor, the Augenblick -- as our German friends say. Don't you agree?'

'I'll -- call a reporting machine,' Superb said.

'Don't give your source, doctor. I'll come back inside with you, I think.' Pembroke urged Dr Superb back up the steps of the building, to the front door of his office. 'Just say that one of your patients, a *Ge,* revealed it to you in confidence, but you feel it's too important to be kept quiet.'

'All right,' Superb said, Nodding.

'And don't worry about the psychological effect on the nation,' Pembroke said. 'On the masses of *Bes.* I think they'll be able to withstand it, once the initial shock has worn off. There will be a reaction, of course; I expect it to demolish the system of government. Wouldn't you agree? By that I mean there will be no further der Altes and no more so-called "Nicole," and no more division into *Ge* and *Be.* Because we'll all be *Ges,* now. Correct?'

'Yes,' Superb said, as step by step he walked through the outer office, past Amanda Conners who stared speechlessly at him and Pembroke.

Half to himself Pembroke murmured, 'All I'm worried about is Bertold Goltz's reaction. Everything else seems to be in order but that's the one factor I can't quite seem to anticipate.'

Superb halted, turned to Amanda. 'Get *The New York Times* reporting machine for me on the phone, please.'

Picking up the phone, Amanda numbly dialled.

Ashen-faced, Maury Frauenzimmer swallowed noisily, put down the newspaper and mumbled to Chic, ‘Do you know which of us leaked the news?' His flesh hung in wattles, as if death were creeping over him.

‘I -- ‘

‘It was your brother Vince. Whom you just brought in here from Karp. Well, this is the end of us. Vince was acting for Karp; they never fired him -- they *sent* him.' Maury crumpled up the newspaper with both hands. ‘God, if only you'd emigrated. If you'd gone he never would have managed to get in here; I wouldn't have hired him without your say-so.' He raised his panic-filled eyes and stared at Chic.

‘Why didn't I let you go?'

Outside the Frauenzimmer Associates factory building a news machine shrilled,' ... vast government secret! Der Alte a simulacrum! New one already being built!' It began all over again, then, mechanically controlled by its central circuits.

‘Destroy it,' Maury croaked at Chic. ‘That -- machine out there. Make it leave, in the name of god.'

Chic said thickly, ‘It won't go. I tried. When I first heard it.' The two of them faced each other, he and his boss Maury Frauenzimmer, neither of them able to speak. Anyhow, there was nothing to say. It was the end of their business. And perhaps of their lives.

At last Maury said, ‘Those Loony Luke lots. Those jalopy jungles. The government closed all of them down, didn't it?'

Chic said, ‘Why?'

‘Because I want to emigrate,' Maury said. ‘I have to get out of here. So do you.'

‘They're closed,' Chic agreed, nodding.

‘You know what we're seeing?' Maury said. ‘This is a coup. A plot against the government of the USEA, by someone or a lot of someones. And they're people inside the apparatus, not outsiders like Goltz. And they're working with the cartels, with Karp, the biggest of them all. They've got a lot of power. This is no street fight. No vulgar brawl.'

He mopped his red, perspiration-soaked face with his handkerchief. ‘I feel ill. Goddamit, we've been brought into it, you and me; the NP boys will be here any minute.'

‘But they must know we didn't intend -- ‘

‘They know *nothing*. They'll be arresting everybody. Up and down.'

Far off a siren sounded. Maury, wide-eyed, listened.

14

As soon as she understood the situation Nicole Thibodeaux gave the order for the Reichsmarschall, Hermann Goering, to be killed.

It was necessary. Very possibly the revolutionary clique had ties with him; in any case she could not take the risk.

Far too much was involved.

In a hidden courtyard of the White House a squad of soldiers from the nearby Army base did the required job; she listened absently to the faint, almost inaudible sound of their high-powered laser rifles, thinking to herself that this -- the death of this man -- proved how little power he had held in the Third Reich. For his death caused no alteration in her time, in the present; the event did not produce even a ripple of alteration. It was a commentary on the governmental structure of Nazi Germany.

Next, she called in NP Commissioner Wilder Pembroke.

'I want a report,' she informed him, 'as to exactly what support the Karps are drawing from. In addition to their own resources. Obviously, they wouldn't have gone ahead with this unless they felt they could count on allies.' She eyed the top NP official with deliberate, rigorously calculated intensity. 'How do the National Police stand?'

Wilder Pembroke said calmly, 'We're ready to deal with the plotters.' He did not seem disturbed; in fact, she thought, he was even more self-possessed than usual. 'As a matter of fact we've already begun rounding them up. Karp employees and executives, and the personnel of the Frauenzimmer outfit. And anyone else who's involved; we're working on that aspect, using von Lessinger's equipment.'

'Why weren't you prepared for this by means of the von Lessinger principle?' Nicole asked sharply.

'Admittedly, this was there. But only as the most meagre possibility. One in a million, of the possible alternative futures. It never occurred to us -- '

'You've just lost your job,' Nicole said. 'Send in your staff. I'll choose a new police commissioner from among them.'

Colouring, incredulous, Pembroke stammered, 'But at every given moment there's a raft of dangerous alternatives so malign that if we -- '

'But you knew,' Nicole said, 'that I was under attack. When that thing, that Martian animal, bit me it should have warned you. From then on you should have been expecting an all-out attack, because that was the beginning.'

‘Shall -- we pick up Luke?'

‘You can't pick up Luke. Luke is on Mars. They all got away, including the two that were here in the White House. Luke came and got them.' She tossed that report to Pembroke. ‘And anyhow, you no longer have any authority.'

There was a strained, unpleasant silence.

‘When that thing bit me,' Nicole said, ‘I knew we were in for a time of difficulty.' But in one respect it was a good thing it had bitten her; it had made her alert. Now she could not be taken by surprise -- she was ready, and it would be a long time before something, or someone -- would bite her again.

Metaphorically or literally.

‘Please, Mrs Thibodeaux -- ‘ Pembroke began.

‘No,' she said. ‘Don't whine. You're out. That's it.'

There's something about you I don't trust, she said to herself. Maybe it's because you let that papoola animal get to me. That was the beginning of your decline, of your career downfall. From then on I was suspicious of you.

And, she thought, it was almost the end of me.

The door of the office opened and Richard Kongrosian appeared, beaming. ‘Nicole, ever since I moved that A.G. Chemie psych-chemist down to the laundry room *I've become fully visible.* It's a miracle!'

‘Fine, Richard,' Nicole said. ‘However, we're having a closed conference in here, at this moment. Come back later.'

Now Kongrosian made out Pembroke. The expression on his face at once changed. Hostility ... she wondered why.

Hostility -- and fear.

‘Richard,' she said suddenly. ‘How would you like to be NP Commissioner? This man -- ‘ She pointed at Wilder Pembroke. ‘He's out.'

‘You're joking,' Kongrosian said.

‘Yes,' she agreed. In a way, at least. But in a way, no.' She needed him, but in what fashion? How could she make use of him and his abilities? At the moment she simply did not know.

Pembroke said stiffly, ‘Mrs Thibodeaux, if you change your mind -- ‘

‘I won't,' she said.

‘In any case,' Pembroke said in a measured, prepared tone of voice, ‘I'll be glad to return to my position and serve you.'

Thereupon he left the room; the door shut after him.

At once Kongrosian said to her, ‘He's going to do something. I'm not sure what it is. Can you tell who's loyal to you at a time like this? Personally, I don't trust him; I think he's part of the planet-wide network of conspiracy scheming against me.' Hastily he added, ‘And

against you, too, of course. They're after you, too. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, Richard.' She sighed.

Outside the White House a news machine squalled; she could hear it vending details about Dieter Hogben. The machine possessed the entire story. And it was exploiting it for all it was worth. She sighed again. The ruling council, those shadowy, ominous figures who stood directly behind every move she made, were undoubtedly thoroughly aroused, now, as if wakened from their sleep. She wondered what they would do. They had a lot of wisdom; collectively, they were quite old. Like snakes they were cold and silent, but very much alive. Very active and yet always obscured from sight.

They never appeared on TV, never gave guided tours.

At the moment she wished she could trade places with them.

And then all at once she realized that something had happened. The news machine was vending something about her.

Not about the next der Alte, Dieter Hogben, but some other *Ge* entirely.

The news machine -- she went to the window to hear better -- was saying that ... She strained to hear.

'Nicole dead!' the machine shrilled. 'Years ago! Actress Kate Rupert in her place! Entire governing apparatus a fraud, according to ... ' And then the news machine moved on. She could no longer hear it, no matter how hard she tried.

His face wrinkled with confusion and uneasiness, Richard Kongrosian asked, 'Wh-what was that, Nicole? It was saying you're dead.'

'Do I look dead?' she asked tartly.

'But it said an actress was taking your place.' Kongrosian, bemused, stared at her, his face working with incomprehension. 'Are you just an actress, Nicole? An impostor, like der Alte? He continued to stare, looking as if he were about to burst into grief-stricken baffled tears.

'It's merely a sensational newspaper story,' Nicole said firmly. She felt, however, frozen all over. Numbed with dark, somatic dread. Everything was out now; some highlyplaced *Ge,* someone even more an intimate of the White House circle than the Karps, had leaked this last, great secret.

There was now nothing left to conceal. Hence there was no longer a distinction between the many *Bes* and the few *Ges.*

There was a knock at the door and without waiting Garth McRae entered, looking grim. He held a copy of *The New York Times.*

'That psychoanalyst, Egon Superb, informed a reporting machine,' he said to Nicole. 'How he found out I don't have the slightest idea -- he's hardly in a position to know first-hand about you; obviously

someone must have deliberately spilled it to him.' He studied the newspaper, his lips moving. 'A patient. A *Ge* patient confided in him and for reasons that we may never know he called the newspaper.'

Nicole said, 'I suppose there's no use arresting him now. I'd like to find out who's using him; that's what I'm interested in.' It was no doubt a hopeless wish, doomed to disappointment. Probably Egon Superb would never say; he would take the pose that it was a professional secret, something given him in sanctified privacy. He would pretend he did not want to get his patient into jeopardy.

'Even Bertold Goltz,' McRae said, 'didn't know that. Even though he roams around here at will.'

'What we're going to see a demand for now,' Nicole said, 'is a general election.' And it would not be she who would be elected, not after this disclosure. She wondered if Epstein, the Attorney General, would consider it his job to take action against her. She could count on the Army, but what about the High Court? It might rule that she was not legally in power. Actually it could be doing that at this very moment.

The council would have to emerge, now. Admit in public that it and no one else held the actual governmental authority.

And the council had never been voted into office of any sort. It was paralegal entirely.

Goltz could say, and truthfully, that he had as much right to rule as the council.

Perhaps even more so. Because Goltz and the Sons of Job had a popular following.

She wished, suddenly, that over the past years she had learned more about the council. Knew who comprised it, what they were like, what their aims were. As a matter of fact she had never even seen it in session; it had dealt with her indirectly, through elaborate screening devices.

'I think,' she said to Garth McRae, 'that I had better go before the TV cameras and address the nation. If they actually see me perhaps they'll take this news less seriously.'

Perhaps the potency of her presence, the old magical power of her image, would prevail. After all, the public was accustomed to seeing her. They believed in her, from decades of conditioning. The tradition-sanctified whip and carrot might still function, at least to a limited extent. At least partially.

They'll believe, she decided, if they *want* to believe. Despite the news being hawked by the news machines. Those cold, impersonal agencies of 'truth.' Of absolute reality, without human subjectivity.

'I'm going to keep on trying,' she said to Garth McRae.

All this time Richard Kongrosian had continued to stare at her. He

did not seem able to take his eyes from her. Now he said hoarsely, ‘I don't believe it, Nicole. *You're real, aren't you?* I can see you, so you must be real!' He gaped at her piteously.

‘I'm real,' she said, and felt sad. A lot of people were in Kongrosian's position, trying desperately to maintain their view of her undamaged, unaltered from that which they were accustomed to. And yet -- was this enough? How many people, like Kongrosian, could break with the reality principle? Believe in something they knew intellectually was an illusion? Few people, after all, were as sick as Richard Kongrosian.

To stay in power she would have to rule a nation of the mentally ill. And the idea did not very much appeal to her.

The door opened and Janet Raimer stood there, small, wrinkled and businesslike. ‘Nicole, please come along with me.' Her voice was dry and faint. But authoritative.

Nicole rose. The council wanted her. As was customary with them they were operating through Janet Raimer, their spokesman.

‘All right,' Nicole said. To Kongrosian and Garth McRae she said, ‘I'm sorry; you'll have to excuse me. Garth, I want you to act temporarily as NP Commissioner; Wilder Pembroke has been busted -I did that just now before you came in. I trust you.' She passed by them, then, and followed after Janet Raimer, out of the office and up the corridor. Janet moved briskly and she had to hurry to keep up.

Flapping his arms miserably, Kongrosian called after her, ‘If you don't exist I'm going to become invisible again *or even worse!'*

She continued on.

‘I'm afraid,' Kongrosian shouted, ‘of what I might do! I don't want it to happen!' He came a few steps out into the corridor after her. ‘Please help me! Before it's too late!'

There was nothing she could do. She did not even look back.

Janet led her to an elevator. ‘This time they're waiting two levels down,' Janet said. ‘They've assembled, all nine of them. Because of the gravity of the situation this time they'll talk to you face to face.'

The elevator slowly descended.

She stepped out, following Janet, in what had been in the previous century the H-bomb shelter for the White House.

Its lights were on and she saw, seated at a long oak table, six men and three women. All but one of them were strangers to her, blank and totally unfamiliar faces. But in the centre she made out to her disbelief a man whom she knew. He appeared, from the seating, to be the chairman of the council.

And his manner was a trifle more imposing, a little more confirmed than that of the others.

The man was Bertold Goltz.

Nicole said, ‘You. The street brawler. I never would have anticipated this.' She felt weary and frightened; across from the nine members of the council she hesitantly seated herself in a wooden straight-backed chair.

Frowning at her, Goltz said, ‘But you knew I had access to von Lessinger equipment. And all time-travel equipment constitutes a monopoly of the government. So obviously I had some form of contact at a very high level. However, that doesn't matter now; we have more urgent business to discuss.'

Janet Raimer said, ‘I'll go back upstairs again.'

‘Thank you,' Goltz said, nodding. To Nicole he said sombrely, ‘You're a rather inept young woman, Kate. However, we'll try to pick up and go on with what we have. The von Lessinger apparatus shows one highly distinct alternative future in which Police Commissioner Pembroke rules as an absolute dictator. This leads us to infer that Wilder Pembroke is involved with the Karps in their effort to unseat you. I think you should have him taken out immediately and shot.'

‘He's lost his post,' Nicole said. ‘Not more than ten minutes ago I relieved him of his duties.'

‘And let him go?' one of the female members of the council asked.

‘Yes,' Nicole admitted reluctantly.

Goltz said, ‘So now it's probably too late to take him into custody. However, let's continue. Nicole, your first action must be against the two monster-cartels, Karp and A.G. Chemie. Anton and Felix Karp are particularly dangerous; we've previewed several alternative futures in which they manage to destroy you and hold power -- at least for a decade or so. We've got to prevent that, regardless of what else we do or do not do.'

‘All right,' Nicole said, nodding reasonably. It seemed a good idea to her. She would have acted against the Karps anyhow, without advice from these individuals.

‘You look,' Goltz said, ‘as if you're thinking that you don't need us to tell you what to do. But actually you need us very badly. We're going to tell you how to save your life, physically, literally, and secondarily your public office. Without us you're dead right now. Please believe me; we've used the von Lessinger equipment and we know.'

‘It's just that I can't get used to the idea of it being you,' Nicole said to Bertold Goltz.

‘But it's always been me,' Goltz said. ‘Even though you didn't know it. Nothing has changed except you've found out, and that's really very little in all this, Kate. Now, do you want to stay alive? Do you want to take instructions from us? Or do you want to be stood up against a wall somewhere by Wilder Pembroke and the Karps and be

executed?' His tone was harsh.

Nicole said, 'Of course. I'll co-operate.'

'Good enough.' Goltz nodded and glanced around at his colleagues. 'The first order you give -- naturally through Rudi Kalbfleisch -- is that Karp und Sohnen Werke throughout the USEA has been nationalized. All Karp assets now are the property of the USEA government. Instruct the military this way: it's their task to seize the Karps' various branches; it'll have to be done with armed units and possibly heavy mobile equipment. It should be done right away, possibly before tonight.'

'All right,' Nicole said.

'A number of army generals, three or four at least, should be sent to the main Karp installations in Berlin; they should arrest the Karp family personally. Have the Karps taken to the nearest military base, have them tried by a military tribunal and executed immediately, also before tonight. Now, as to Pembroke. I think it would be better if the Sons of Job sent commando assassins to get Pembroke; we'll leave the military out of this aspect of the situation.' Goltz's tone changed. 'Why that expression on your face, Kate?'

'I have a headache,' Nicole said. 'And don't call me "Kate." As long as I'm in power you should continue to call me Nicole.'

'All this distresses you, doesn't it?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I don't want to murder anybody, even Pembroke and the Karps. The Reichsmarschall was enough -- more than enough. I didn't murder those two jug-players who brought that papoola into the White House so it could bite me, those two underlings of Loony Luke. I let them emigrate to Mars.'

'It can't all be handled that way.'

'Evidently not,' Nicole agreed.

Behind Nicole the door of the shelter opened. She turned, expecting to see Janet Raimer.

Wilder Pembroke, with a group of NP men, stood in the doorway, pistol in hand. 'You're all under arrest,' Pembroke said. 'The lot of you.'

Leaping to his feet, Goltz groped inside his coat.

With a single shot Pembroke killed him. Goltz toppled backward, plucking at his chair; the chair slammed back as it overturned and Goltz lay on his side beyond the oak table.

No one else moved.

To Nicole, Pembroke said, 'You're coming upstairs; you're going to make a TV appearance. Right away.' He waved the barrel of his gun shakily at her. 'Hurry up! The TV-cast begins in ten minutes.' From his pocket he managed to bring forth a much-folded sheet of paper. 'Here's what you'll say.' He added, grimacing in what seemed almost a

tic, ‘It's your resignation from office, or rather so-called office. And in it you admit that both news stories are true, the one about der Alte and the one about yourself.'

Nicole said, ‘Whom do I abdicate in favour of?' Her own voice sounded thin in her ears but at least it was not pleading. She was glad of that.

‘An emergency police committee,' Pembroke said. ‘Which will supervise the forthcoming general election, and then of course resign.'

The stunned, passive remaining eight members of the council started to follow Nicole.

‘No,' Pembroke said to them. ‘You're all staying down here.' His face was white. ‘With the police team.'

‘You know what he's going to do, don't you?' one of the council members said to Nicole. ‘He's given orders to have us killed.' The man's words were hardly audible.

‘There's nothing she can do about it,' Pembroke said, and once more waved his gun at Nicole.

‘We previewed this on the von Lessinger apparatus,' a female member of the council said to Nicole. ‘But we couldn't believe it would happen. Bertold dismissed it. As too improbable. We thought such practices had died out.'

With Pembroke, Nicole entered the elevator. The two of them ascended to the ground-level floor.

‘Don't kill them,' Nicole said. ‘Please.'

Examining his wristwatch Pembroke said, ‘By now they're already dead.'

The elevator doors slid open; the elevator had stopped.

‘Go directly to your office,' Pembroke instructed her.

‘You'll deliver the telecast from there. It's interesting, isn't it, that the council did *not* take seriously the long-shot possibility that I might get them before they got me. They were so convinced of their own absolute power that they assumed I'd go like a sheep to my own destruction. I doubt if they even took the trouble to preview these last few moments. They must have known there was a reasonably good chance that I'd gain power but they evidently didn't follow up the situation and learn precisely *how.'*

‘I can't believe,' Nicole said, ‘that they could be so foolish. In spite of what they said and you said. With the von Lessinger equipment at their disposal -- ‘ It seemed impossible to her that Bertold Goltz and the others had simply let themselves be killed; logically, they should have been beyond reach.

‘They were frightened,' Pembroke said. ‘And frightened people lose the ability to think.'

Ahead lay Nicole's office.

On the floor before the doorway lay an inert form. It was Janet Raimer.

'We found ourselves in a position where we were coerced into doing that,' Pembroke said. 'Or rather -- let's face it we wanted to do it. Let's be honest with each other, finally. No, I don't have to. Taking care of Miss Raimer was an act of pure, enjoyable volition.' He stepped over Janet's body and opened the door to Nicole's office.

In the office stood Richard Kongrosian. *'Something terrible's happening to me,'* Kongrosian wailed, as soon as he spied the two of them. 'I no longer can keep myself and my environment separate; do you comprehend how that feels? It's awful!' He came towards them, visibly quaking; his eyes rolled with abject fear and sweat stood out on his neck and forehead and hands. 'Can you understand?'

'Later,' Pembroke said to him, nervously. Again she saw the tic, the involuntary grimace. To her Pembroke said, 'First, I want you to read over that material I gave you. Get started on it right away.' Once more he examined his wristwatch. 'The TV technicians should have been here and set up by now.'

Kongrosian said, 'I sent them away. They made it even more difficult for me. Look -- see that desk? I'm now part of it and it's part of me! Watch and I'll show you.' He scrutinized the desk intently, his mouth working. And, on the desk, a vase of pale roses lifted, moved through the air towards Kongrosian. The vase, as they watched, passed into Kongrosian's chest and disappeared. 'It's inside me now,' he quavered. 'I absorbed it. *Now it's me.* And -- ' He gestured at the desk. 'I'm it!'

In the spot where the vase had been Nicole saw, forming into density and mass and colour, a complicated tangle of interwoven organic matter, smooth red tubes and what appeared to be portions of an endocrine system. A section, she realized, of Kongrosian's internal anatomy. Perhaps, she thought, his spleen and circulatory configurations that maintained it. The organ, whatever it was, regularly pulsed; it was alive and active. How elaborate it is, she thought; she could not take her eyes from it, and even Wilder Pembroke was gazing fixedly at it.

'I'm turning inside out!'

Kongrosian wailed. 'Pretty soon if this keeps up I'm going to have to envelop the entire universe and everything in it, and the only thing that'll be outside me will be my internal organs and then most likely I'll die!'

'Listen, Kongrosian,' Pembroke said harshly. He turned the gun towards the psychokinetic concert pianist. 'What do you mean by sending the TV crew out of here? I need them in this office; Nicole's going to address the nation. You go and tell them to come back.' He

gestured at Kongrosian with the gun. ‘Or get a White House employee who -- ‘

He broke off. The gun had left his hand.

‘Help me!' Kongrosian howled. *‘It's becoming me and I have to be it!'* The gun vanished into Kongrosian's body.

In Pembroke's hand a spongy, pink mass of lung-tissue appeared; instantly he dropped it and at once Kongrosian shrieked with pain.

Nicole shut her eyes. ‘Richard,' she moaned gratingly.

‘Stop it. Get control of yourself.'

‘Yes,' Kongrosian said, and giggled helplessly. ‘I can get hold of myself, pick myself up, the organs and vital parts all around me, lying on the floor; maybe I can stuff them back inside, somehow.'

Opening her eyes, Nicole said, ‘Can you get me out of here, now? Move me a long way off, Richard. *Please.'*

‘I can't breathe,' Kongrosian panted. ‘Pembroke has part of my breathing-apparatus and he dropped it; he didn't take care of it -- he let me fall.' He made a gesture towards the NP man ...

Quietly, his face drained of colour and the ordinary hopefulness of the process of life, Pembroke said, ‘He's shut off something inside me. Some essential organ.'

‘That's right!' Kongrosian shrieked. ‘I shut off your -- but I'm not going to tell you.' Slyly, he poked a finger at Pembroke, waggling it in his direction. ‘Only this; I'll say this: you'll live for about, oh, say, four more hours.' He laughed. ‘What do you say to that?'

‘Can you turn it back on?' Pembroke managed to say.

Pain had infiltrated his features now; he was suffering.

‘If I want,' Kongrosian said. ‘But I don't want to because I don't have time. I've got to collect myself.' He scowled in rapt concentration. ‘I'm busy evicting every foreign object that's managed to enter me,' he explained to Pembroke and Nicole. ‘And I want myself back; I'm going to *make* myself come back inside.' He glowered at the pink spongy mass of lung tissue. ‘You're me,' he told it. ‘You're part of the I-world, not the non-I. Understand?'

‘Please take me a long way from here,' Nicole said to him.

‘Okay, okay,' Kongrosian agreed irritably. ‘Where do you want to be? In another city entirely? On Mars? Who knows how far I can move you -- I don't. As Mr Pembroke said, I haven't really learned the political uses of my ability, even after all these years. But anyhow now I'm in politics.' He chuckled with delight. ‘What about Berlin? I can move you from here to Berlin; I'm confident of that.'

‘Anything,' Nicole said.

‘I know where I'll send you.' Kongrosian exclaimed suddenly. ‘I know where you'll be safe, Nicky. Understand, I *want* you to be safe; I believe in you, I know you exist. No matter what those damn news

machines say. I mean, they're lying. *I can tell.* They're trying to shake my confidence in you; they've all ganged up, saying exactly the same thing.'

He added by way of explanation, 'I'm sending you to my home in Jenner, California. You can stay with my wife and my son. Pembroke can't get you there because he'll be stone dead by then; I've turned off another organ inside him, now, and this one -- never mind which it is -- this one is even more vital than the other. He won't live another six minutes.'

Nicole said, 'Richard, let him -- ' She ceased, then, because they were gone. Kongrosian, Pembroke, her office in the White House, everything had whipped out of existence and she stood in a gloomy rain forest. Mist drizzled from the shiny leaves; the ground underfoot was soft, impregnated with dampness. She heard no one. The moisture-saturated forest was utterly silent.

She was alone.

Presently she began to walk. She felt stiff and old and it was an effort to move. She felt as if she had stood there in the silence and rain for a million years. It was as if she had been there forever.

Ahead, through the vines and tangle of wet shrubbery she saw the outlines of a dilapidated, unpainted redwood building. A house. She walked towards it, her arms folded, shivering from the cold.

When she pushed the last branch aside she saw, parked ahead of her, an archaic-looking auto-cab in the centre of what appeared to be the house's driveway.

Opening the door of the auto-cab she said, 'Take me to the nearest town.'

The mechanism of the cab did not respond. It remained inert, as if it were moribund.

'Can't you hear me?' she said loudly to it.

A woman's voice came to her, from a distance. 'I'm sorry, miss. That cab belongs to the record people, it can't respond because it's still under hire to them.'

'Oh,' Nicole said, and straightened up, closing the door of the cab. 'Are you Richard Kongrosian's wife?'

'Yes, I am,' the woman said, descending the board steps of the house. 'Who are -- ' She blinked. 'You're Nicole Thibodeaux.'

'I was,' Nicole said. 'Can I come indoors and get something hot to drink? I don't feel too well.'

'Of course,' Mrs Kongrosian said. 'Please. Did you come here to find Richard? He's not here; the last I heard from him he was at a neuro-psychiatric hospital in San Francisco, Franklin Aimes. Do you know it?'

'I know it,' Nicole said. 'But he's not there now. No, I'm not

looking for him.' She followed Mrs Kongrosian up the steps to the front porch of the house.

'The record people have been here three days,' Mrs Kongrosian said. 'Recording and recording. I'm beginning to think they're never going to leave. They're nice people and I enjoy their company; they've been staying here at night. They showed up originally to record my husband playing, under an old contract with Art-Cor, but as I said, he's gone.' She held the front door open.

Nicole said, 'Thank you for your hospitality.' The house, she discovered, was warm and dry; it was a relief from the dreary landscape outside. A fire burned in the fireplace and she went over to it.

'I heard the strangest garbling thing over the TV just now,' Mrs Kongrosian said. 'Something about you; I couldn't make any sense out of it. Something having to do with you -- well, not existing, I think. Do you know what I'm talking about? What they were talking about?'

'I'm afraid I don't,' Nicole said, warming herself.

Mrs Kongrosian said, 'I'll go and fix the coffee. They Mr Flieger and the others from EME -- should be back fairly soon, now. For dinner. Are you alone? Nobody's with you?' She seemed bewildered.

'I'm entirely alone,' Nicole said. She wondered if Wilder Pembroke was dead by now. She hoped so, for her own sake.

'Your husband,' she said, 'is a very fine person. I owe him a great deal.' My life, as a matter of fact, she realized.

'He certainly thinks a lot of you, too,' Mrs Kongrosian said.

'Can I stay here?' Nicole said suddenly.

'Of course. For as long as you wish.'

'Thanks,' Nicole said. She felt a little better. Maybe I'll never go back, she thought. After all, what's there to go back to? Janet is dead, Bertold Goltz is dead, even Reichsmarschall Goering is dead, and of course Wilder Pembroke; he's dead by now, too. And the entire ruling council, all the half-concealed figures who had stood behind her. Assuming of course that the NP men had carried out their orders, which no doubt they had.

And, she thought, I can't rule any longer; the news machines have seen to that in their blind, efficient, mechanical way. They and the Karps. So now, she decided, it's the Karps' turn; they can hold power for a while. Until they in turn are preempted, as I was.

She thought, I can't even go to Mars. At least not by jalopy! I saw to that myself. But there are other ways. Big legal commercial ships and government ships as well. Very fast ships which belong to the military; perhaps I could commandeer one of those. I could work through Rudi, even though he is -- or it is -- on its deathbed. Legally, the army has sworn an oath to him; they're supposed to do what he, or

it, tells them.

‘Coffee? Are you all right? Are you ready for it?' Mrs Kongrosian peered at her intently.

‘Yes,' Nicole answered, ‘I am.' She followed Mrs Kongrosian into the kitchen of the big old house.

Outside the house the rain fell heavily, now. Nicole shivered and tried not to look directly at it. The rain frightened her; it was like an omen. A reminder of some evil fate to come.

‘What are you afraid of?' Mrs Kongrosian said suddenly, acutely.

‘I don't know,' Nicole confessed.

‘I've seen Richard like this. It must be the climate, here. It's so dismal and monotonous. But I thought from his description of you that you'd never be this way. He always made you sound so brave. So forceful.'

‘I'm sorry to disappoint you.'

Mrs Kongrosian patted her on the arm. ‘You don't disappoint me. I like you very much. I'm sure it is the climate that's getting you down.'

‘Maybe so,' Nicole said. But she knew better. It was more than the rain. Much more.

15

The hard-eyed, middle-aged and utterly professional NP man said to Maury Frauenzimmer and Chic Strikerock, ‘You're both under arrest. Come along with me.'

‘You see?' Maury said with scalding accusation to Chic.

‘I told you so! The bastards have it in for us. We're the fall-guys in this. The lowest dupes on the ladder -- the ultimate simps.'

With Maury, Chic left the small, familiar, cluttered office of Frauenzimmer Associates, the NP man immediately behind them. He and Maury trudged gloomily, in silence, to the parked police car.

‘A couple of hours ago,' Maury burst out suddenly, ‘we had everything. Now, on account of your brother, look what we've got. *Nothing.'*

Chic did not respond. There was no answer he could make.

‘I'm going to get you, Chic,' Maury said as the police car started up and moved towards the autobahn. ‘So help me god.'

‘We'll get out of this,' Chic said. ‘We've had troubles before. They've always passed. Somehow.'

‘If only you had emigrated,' Maury said.

And I wish I had, too, Chic thought to himself. Right now Richard Kongrosian and I would be -- where? In deep space, on our way to our frontier farm, beginning a chaste, new life. And instead ... this. He wondered where Kongrosian was, right now. Doing just as badly? Hardly likely.

‘Next time when you start to leave the firm -- ‘ Maury began.

‘Okay!' Chic said savagely. ‘Let's forget it. What can be done now?' The one I'd like to get, he thought, is my brother Vince. And, after him, Anton and old Felix Karp.

The NP man seated next to him all at once said to the NP man driving, ‘Hey look, Sid. A roadblock.'

The police car slowed. Peering, Chic saw, at the roadblock, an army mobile weapons carrier; on it, a big gun pointed eerily at the lines of cars and wheels halted by the barricade across the eight lanes.

Beside Chic the NP man drew his hand weapon. So did the driver.

‘What's going on?' Chic asked, his heart labouring.

Neither NP man answered; their gaze was riveted on the army unit blocking the autobahn in effective, trained fashion. Both men had become acutely tense; Chic could sense it. It permeated the interior of the car.

At that moment, as the police car crept along almost touching the car ahead, a Theodorus Nitz commercial slipped in through the open window.

‘Do people seem able to see right through your clothing?' it squeaked at them, bat-like, as it slithered into concealment under the front seat. ‘In public, does your fly seem to be unzipped and do you need to glance down -- ‘

It died into silence as the NP man driving venomously shot it with his pistol. ‘Jeez, I hate those things,' he spat out with aversion.

At the sound of the shot the police car was immediately surrounded by soldiers, all armed and all hair-trigger alert.

‘Put your weapons down!' the sergeant in charge barked.

Reluctantly, the two NP men tossed their guns aside. A soldier plucked the car door open; the two NP men stepped warily out, their arms raised.

‘Whom were you shooting at?' the sergeant demanded, ‘At us?'

‘A Nitz commercial,' one of the NP men said shakily.

‘Look in the car, under the seat; we weren't shooting at you -- honest!'

‘He's telling the truth,' a soldier said finally, after poking about in the car. ‘There is a dead Theodoras Nitz commercial under the seat.'

The sergeant reflected and then decided. ‘You can go on. But leave your weapons with us.' He added, ‘And your prisoners. And from now on you take all your orders from GHQ, not from the higher police.'

At once the two NP men hopped back into their car; the doors slammed shut as they drove off into traffic as rapidly as possible, through the opening in the army barricade. Chic and Maury watched them go.

‘What's up?' Chic asked.

‘You're free to go,' the sergeant informed him. ‘Return to your homes and stay inside. Don't participate in anything going on in the streets; no matter what seems to be happening.' The squad of soldiers moved off then, leaving Chic and Maury standing alone.

‘It's a revolt,' Maury said, his jaw hanging. ‘By the army.'

‘Or by the police,' Chic said, thinking rapidly. ‘We're going to have to hitch hike back to town.' He hadn't hitch hiked since he was a kid; it seemed odd to be doing it now, in his adult years. It was almost refreshing. He began to walk down the stalled lines of traffic, his thumb out. Wind blew in his face; it smelled of land and water and big cities.

He took a deep, full breath of it.

‘Wait for me!' Maury yelled, and hurried after him.

In the sky, to the north, an immense, grey, mushroom-like cloud all at once formed. And a rumble stirred through the earth, jarring Chic and making him jump. Shielding his eyes he peered to see; what had happened? An explosion, perhaps a small, tactical A-bomb. Now

he inhaled the reek of ashes and knew definitely what it was.

A soldier, striding past him, said over his shoulder, 'The local branch of Karp und Sohnen Werke.' He grinned starkly at Chic and hurried on.

Maury said in a soft voice, 'They blew it up. The army blew up Karp.'

'I guess so,' Chic said, dazed. Again, reflexively, he stuck out his thumb, searching for their ride.

Above, two army rockets streaked in pursuit of an NP ship; Chic watched them until they were gone from sight.

It's a full-scale war, he said to himself, awed.

'I wonder if they're going to blow us up, too,' Maury said.

'I mean the factory. Frauenzimmer Associates.'

'We're too small,' Chic said.

'Yeah, I guess you're right,' Maury said, nodding hopefully.

It's good to be small, Chic realized, in times like this. And the smaller the better. Right down to the vanishing point.

Ahead of him and Maury a car had stopped. They walked towards it.

Now, to the east, another fungus-shaped mass of cloud material expanded to fill the sky, and again the ground shook. That would be A.G. Chemie, Chic decided as he got into the waiting car.

'Where you boys headed for?' the driver of the car, a plump, red-haired man, inquired.

Maury said, 'Anywhere and everywhere, mister. Just so it's away from all this trouble.'

'I agree,' the plump, red-haired man said, and started the car into motion. 'Oh, how I agree.' It was an old, out-of-style car but it was good enough. Chic Strikerock sat back and made himself comfortable.

Beside him, visibly relieved, Maury Frauenzimmer did the same.

'I guess they're getting them big cartels,' the red-headed man said as he drove slowly forward, following the car ahead of him through the barricade's narrow aperture and out the far side.

'Sure are,' Maury said.

'About time,' the red-headed man said.

'Right,' Chic Strikerock said. 'I'm with you there.'

The car, gathering speed, moved on.

In the large old wooden building, full of dust and echoes, the chuppers moved about, talking with one another, drinking Cokes, and a few of them were dancing. It was the dancing which interested Nat Flieger, and he led the portable Ampek F-a2 in that direction.

'Dancing, no,' Jim Planck said to him, 'singing, yes. Wait until they begin to sing again. If you can dignify it by calling it that.'

Nat said, 'The sounds of their dancing are rhythmic. I think we

ought to try to pick that up, too.'

'Technically you're head of this venture,' Jim admitted.

'But I've done an awful lot of recording in my time and I say this is useless. It'll be there on the tape, admittedly, or rather in that *wormy* of yours. But it'll sound like nothing. Nothing at all.' He glared remorselessly at Nat.

But I intend to try anyhow, Nat said to himself.

'They're so bent,' Molly said, standing beside him. 'All of them ... and they're so short. Most of them aren't even as tall as I am.'

'They lost,' Jim said, with a laconic shrug. 'Remember? What was it, two hundred thousand years ago? Three hundred thousand? Anyhow it was quite a while ago. I doubt if they'll survive very much longer this time either. They just don't look like they have it. They look -- burdened.'

That was it, Nat realized. The chuppers -- the Neanderthals -- looked weighed down, and by an impossible task, that of survival itself. Jim was absolutely correct; they just were not equipped for that task. Meek, small and hunched, apologetic, shuffling and mumbling, they lurched along their meagre life-track, getting nearer each moment to the end.

So we'd better record this while we can, Nat decided. Because it probably won't be long now, from the looks of it.

Or ... could I be wrong? A chupper, an adult male wearing a plaid shirt and light grey work pants bumped against Nat and muttered an inarticulate apology.

'That's okay,' Nat assured him. He felt, then, the desire to test his theory, to try to cheer up this failing life form, this throwback. 'Let me buy you a beer,' he said to the chupper.

'Okay?' There was, he knew, a bar of sorts in the rear of the building, this large, central recreation hall which the chuppers seemed to possess collectively.

The chupper, glancing at him shyly, mumbled a no thanks.

'Why not?' Nat demanded.

' 'Cause -- ' The chupper seemed unable to meet Nat's gaze; he regarded the floor, clenched and unclenched his fists in a closed-circuit-like but passing spasm. 'I can't,' the chupper finally managed to say. However, he did not go. He remained standing in front of Nat, still staring down and still grimacing. Probably he was frightened, Nat decided.

Embarrassed in a frightened, obliterating way.

To the chupper Jim Planck said drawlingly, 'Hey, can you sing any good chupper songs? We'll record you.' He winked at Nat.

'Leave him alone,' Molly said. 'You can see he can't sing. He can't do anything -- that's obvious.' She walked away, clearly angry at both

of them. The chupper glanced after her listlessly, drooping in his chupper fashion; his eyes were dull.

Would anything, Nat wondered, make those dull eyes light up? Why did the chuppers want to survive, if life meant so little to them? He thought suddenly, maybe they're waiting. For something that hasn't happened yet, but which they know -- or hope -- will occur. That would explain their manner, their -- emptiness.

'Leave him alone,' Nat said to Jim Planck. 'She's right.'

He put his hand on Jim's shoulder but the recording expert pulled away.

'I think they can do a lot more than they appear to be able to,' Jim said. 'It's almost as if they're marking time, not expending themselves. Not trying. Hell, I'd like to see them try.'

'So would I,' Nat said. 'But we're not going to be able to get them to try.'

Off in a corner of the hall a television set boomed loudly, and a number of chuppers, both male and female, had wandered over to it to stand inertly in front of it. The TV set, Nat realized, was giving news of some urgent sort. At once he turned his attention that way; something had happened.

'You hear what the newscaster is saying?' Jim said in his ear. 'My god, some damn thing about a war.'

The two of them edged through the throng of chuppers, shoving their way up to the TV set. Molly was already there, already absorbed in listening.

'It's a revolution,' she said stonily to Nat, above the hollow, booming uproar emanating from the TV set's audio system. 'Karp -- ' Her face was drenched with disbelief. 'The Karps and A.G. Chemie, they tried to seize power, along with the National Police.'

The TV screen showed a smoking, virtually disintegrated ruin, the remains of buildings, an industrial installation of great magnitude that had been all but obliterated. It was, to Nat, unrecognizable.

'That's Karp's Detroit branch,' Molly managed to tell Nat, above the racket. 'The military got it. Honest to god, that's what the announcer just said.'

Jim Planck, studying the screen impassively, said, 'Who's winning?'

'Nobody yet,' Molly said. 'Evidently. I don't know. Listen and see what he says. It's just broken out, just getting underway.'

The chuppers, listening and watching, had become silent.

The phonograph which had played background music for them to shuffle to had become silent, too. The chuppers, almost all of them now, stood clustered around the TV set, rapt and attentive as they witnessed the scenes of fighting between the armed forces of the USEA

and the issue from the barracks of the National Police backed up by the cartel system.

‘ ... in California,' the announcer was spluttering, ‘the West Coast Division of the NP surrendered intact to the Sixth Army under General Hoheit. However in Nevada -- ‘

The set showed a street scene, downtown Reno; an army barricade had been hastily erected, and police snipers were firing at it from the windows of the nearby buildings. ‘Ultimately,' the newscaster said, ‘the fact that the armed forces possess a virtual monopoly in atomic weapons would seem to guarantee them victory. But for the present, we can only ... ‘ The newscaster rattled excitedly on, as all over the USEA the mechanical reporting machines coasting about in the areas of conflict gathered data for him.

‘It's going to be a long fight,' Jim Planck said suddenly to Nat. He looked grey and tired. ‘I guess we're darn lucky we're here, out of the way,' he murmured, half to himself. ‘It's a good time to lay low.'

The screen showed a clash between a police patrol and an army unit, now; the two fired rapidly at each other, scurrying for cover as shots zinged from their automatic small arms. A soldier pitched forward on his face and then so did a grey NP man.

Next to Nat Flieger a chupper, watching absorbedly, nudged the chupper standing beside him. The two chuppers, both males, smiled at each other. A covert, meaningful smile. Nat saw it, saw the expression of their two faces. And then he realized that all the chuppers had become brighteyed with the same secret pleasure.

What's going on here? Nat wondered.

Beside him, Jim Planck said softly, ‘Nat, my god. *They've been waiting for this.'*

So this is it, Nat realized with a thrill of fear. The emptiness, the dull listlessness; that had gone. The chuppers were alert now as they viewed the flickering TV image and listened to the excited news announcer. What does this mean to them? Nat wondered as he studied their emotion-laden, eager faces. It means, he decided, that they have a chance.

This might be their opportunity.

We're destroying each other before their eyes. And -- it may provide room for them, a space to squeeze into. Room, not cooped up here in this dreary, tiny enclave, but out in the world itself. Everywhere.

Grinning knowingly at one another the chuppers continued avidly to watch. And listen.

Nat's fear grew.

The plump, red-headed man who had given Maury and Chic the ride said, ‘This is as far as I'm going, boys. You'll have to hop out.' He

slowed the car, stopped at the curb. They were in the city, now, off the autobahn. On every side, men and women scampered in panic, seeking shelter. A police car, its windshield shattered, nosed forward cautiously, the men inside bristling with weapons. ‘Better get indoors,' the red-headed man advised.

Warily, Chic and Maury emerged from the car.

‘My place, The Abraham Lincoln,' Chic said, ‘is near here. We can walk it. Come on.' He waved big, overweight Maury ahead and the two of them joined the running mob of frightened, confused people. What a mess, Chic said to himself. I wonder how it'll wind up. I wonder if our society, our style of life, will survive this.

‘I feel sick at my stomach,' Maury groaned, puffing along beside him, his face grey from the exertion. ‘I'm -- not used to this.'

They reached The Abraham Lincoln. It was undamaged.

At the doorway their sergeants of arms, with a gun, stood beside Vince Strikerock, their identification reader; Vince was checking each person in turn, busy at his official task.

‘Hi, Vince,' Chic said, when he and Maury arrived at the station.

His brother jerked, raised his head; they regarded each other in silence. At last Vince said, ‘Hi, Chic. Glad to see you're alive.'

‘Do we get in?' Chic said.

‘Sure,' Vince said. He looked away, then; nodding to the sergeant of arms he said to Chic, ‘Go ahead. I'm sure glad the NP didn't manage to corner you.' He did not look once at Maury Frauenzimmer; he pretended that Maury was not there.

‘What about me?' Maury said.

In a strangled voice Vince said, ‘You -- can go inside too. As Chic's special invited guest.'

Behind them the next man in line said with urgent peevishness, ‘Hey, hurry up, will you! It isn't safe out here.' He bumped Chic, nudging him on.

Quickly Chic and Maury passed on inside The Abraham Lincoln. A moment later they were ascending by a familiar means: a building elevator. To Chic's top-floor apartment.

‘I wonder what he got out of it,' Maury said musingly.

‘Your kid brother, I mean.'

‘Nothing,' Chic said shortly. ‘Karp is gone. He and a lot of people are finished, now.' And Vince isn't the only one I know of that group, he said to himself.

‘Including us,' Maury said. ‘We're no better off. Of course I guess a lot depends on who wins.'

‘It doesn't matter who wins,' Chic said. Not as far as he could make out, at least. The destruction, the great national disaster, was still there. That was the terrible thing about civil war; no matter how

it came out it was still bad. Still a catastrophe. And for everyone.

When they reached the apartment they found the door unlocked. With massive caution Chic opened the door. And peeped inside.

There stood Julie.

'Chic!' she said, starting a step or so towards him. Beside her were two big suitcases. 'I've been packing. I've made arrangements for you and me to emigrate. *I've got the tickets* ... and don't ask me how because I'll never tell you.'

Her face was pale but composed; she had dressed up quite a bit and looked, he thought, exceptionally fine. Now she saw Maury. 'Who is this?' she asked, faltering.

'My boss,' Chic said.

'I just have two tickets,' Julie said hesitantly.

'That's okay,' Maury said to her. He beamed at her, to reassure her. 'I have to stay on Earth. I've got a major business enterprise to preside over.' to Chic he said, 'I think she's got a good idea. So this is the girl you told me about on the phone. The reason you were late to work, that morning.'

He slapped Chic genially on the back. 'Lots of luck to you, old buddy. I guess you've proved you're still young -- young enough, anyhow. I envy you.'

Julie said, 'Our ship leaves in forty-five minutes; I was praying like hell you'd show up here. I tried to get hold of you at work -- '

'The NP picked us up,' Chic told her.

'The army has control of the space field,' Julie said. 'And they're supervising the arrivals and departures of deep-space ships. So if we can just make it to the field we'll be all right.' she added, 'I put all your money and mine together to buy the tickets; they were incredibly expensive. And with those jalopy jungles gone -- '

'You two guys better get started,' Maury said. 'I'll stay here in the apartment, if it's okay with you. It appears to be reasonably safe here, all things considered.' He seated his weary, overstuffed body on the couch, managed to cross his legs, got out a Dutch Masters cigar and lit up.

'Maybe I'll see you again, one of these days,' Chic said to him, awkwardly. He did not know exactly how to make the break, to leave.

'Maybe so,' Maury grunted. 'Anyhow, drop me a line from Mars.' He picked up a magazine from the coffee table and leafed through it, his attention turned to it.

'What are we going to do on Mars to stay alive?' Chic asked Julie. 'Farm? Or had you thought about that?'

'Farm,' she said, 'Claim a piece of good land get started irrigating it. I have relatives there. They'll help us get started.' She picked up one of the suitcases; Chic took it away from her and then hoisted the

other.

‘So long,' Maury said, in a contrived, overly-light tone. ‘I wish you two luck scratching around in that red, dusty soil.'

‘Good luck to you, too,' Chic said. I wonder who'll need it the most, he wondered. You here on Earth or us on Mars.

‘Maybe I'll send you a couple of sims,' Maury said, ‘to keep you company. When this all blows over.' Puffing on his cigar, he watched the two of them go.

The blaring music had arrived once more now, and some of the hunched, massive-jawed chuppers had resumed their shuffling dancing. Nat Flieger turned away from the TV set.

‘I think we've got enough on the Ampek,' he said to Molly. ‘We can start back to the Kongrosians' house. We're through, finally.'

Molly said sombrely, ‘Maybe we're through everywhere, Nat. You know, just because we've been the dominant species for a few tens of thousands of years it doesn't ensure that -- ‘

‘I know,' Nat said to her. ‘I saw their faces, too.' He led her back to where they had left the Ampek F-a2. Jim Planck followed and the three of them stood together, by the portable recording apparatus. ‘Well?' Nat said. ‘Shall we start back? Is it really over? ‘It's over, Jim Planck said, nodding.

‘But I think,' Molly said, ‘we should stay here in the Jenner area until the fighting lets up. It wouldn't be safe to try to fly back down below to Tijuana right now. If Beth Kongrosian will let us stay, let's stay. Right there in the house.'

‘All right,' Nat said. He agreed with her. Completely.

Jim Planck said abruptly, ‘Look. There's a woman coming over here towards us. Not a chupper but a -- you know, what we are, the same as us.'

The woman, slender and young, with short-cropped hair, wearing blue-cotton trousers and moccasins and a white shirt, threaded her way through the shuffling gangs of chuppers.

I know her, Nat said to himself. I've seen her a million times. He knew her and yet he did not; it was terribly strange. So incredibly damn pretty, he thought. Almost grotesquely, unnaturally beautiful. How many women *that* attractive do I know? None. No one in our world, in our lives, is that attractive except … Except Nicole Thibodeaux.

‘Are you Mr Flieger?' she called, coming up close to him, then, gazing up into his face; she was very small, he discovered. That had not been apparent over the TV transmissions. In fact he had always thought of Nicole Thibodeaux as looming large, even ominous; it was a distinct shock to find her otherwise. He could not exactly understand it.

‘Yes,' he said.

Nicole said, ‘Richard Kongrosian put me here and I want to get back where I belong. Can you take me out of here in your auto-cab?'

‘Sure,' Nat said, nodding. ‘Anything.'

None of the chuppers paid any attention to her; they seemed neither to know nor care who she was. Jim Planck and Molly, however, gaped in mute disbelief.

‘When are you leaving?' Nicole asked.

‘Well,' Nat said, ‘we were going to stay. Because of the fighting. It seemed safer here.'

‘No,' Nicole insisted, at once. ‘You have to go back; you have to do your part. Do you want them to win?'

‘I don't even know who you're talking about,' Nat said. ‘I can't make out exactly what's going on, what the issues are or who's fighting whom. Do you know? Maybe you can tell me.' But I doubt it, he thought. I doubt if you can turn it into something sensible for me -- or for anyone else. Because it is just not sensible.

Nicole said, ‘What would it require to get you to take me back or at least out of here?'

Shrugging, Nat said, ‘Nothing.' All at once he had made up his mind; he saw things clearly. ‘Because I won't do it. I'm sorry. We're going to wait this out, this event that's going on. I don't know how Kongrosian managed to put you here, but maybe he's right; maybe this is the best place to be, for you and for us. For a long time to come.' He smiled at her. Nicole did not smile back.

‘Damn you,' Nicole said.

He continued to smile.

‘Please,' she said. ‘Help me. You were going to; you started to.'

Speaking up huskily. Jim Planck said, ‘Maybe he is helping you, Mrs Thibodeaux. By doing this, by keeping you here.'

‘I think Nat's right, too,' Molly said. ‘I'm sure it's unsafe for you at the White House right now.'

Nicole looked around fiercely at the three of them. Then, resignedly, she sighed. ‘What a place to be stuck in. Damn that Richard Kongrosian, too; it's basically his fault. What *are* these creatures?' She gestured at the shuffling line of adult chuppers and the small, neo-chupper children who lined both sides of the great dusty, wooden hall.

‘I'm not quite certain,' Nat said. ‘Relatives of ours, you could say. Progeny, very possibly.'

‘Forefathers,' Jim Planck said, correcting him.

Nat said, ‘Time will tell which it is.'

Lighting a cigarillo, Nicole said vigorously, ‘I don't like them; I'll feel a lot happier when we get back to the house. They make me just

dreadfully uncomfortable.'

'They should,' Nat said. Certainly he shared her extreme reaction.

Around the four of them the chuppers danced their monotonous dance, paying no attention to the four human beings.

'I think, however,' Jim Planck said thoughtfully, 'we're going to have to get accustomed to them.'